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ART IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND THE IWO AWOLO CERAMIC EXHIBITION

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted conventional lifestyles and operational practices, compelling individuals and organizations to adapt rapidly to new circumstances. As the pandemic intensified, technological advancements, which had been progressively developing throughout the 21st century, emerged as crucial tools for managing these unprecedented challenges. The transition to remote work became a necessity, reshaping traditional work environments and practices. This shift extended beyond professional settings, affecting various aspects of daily life, including cultural and recreational activities. In particular, art exhibitions, which traditionally relied on physical gatherings, faced significant restrictions. As a result, there was a marked increase in the adoption of virtual alternatives to physical events, enabling art communities and audiences to continue engaging with exhibitions and creative expressions despite social distancing measures. This study examines the role of technological advancements in facilitating this transition and explores the implications for future practices in art and other fields that were similarly impacted by the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Realities from the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted many people's normal ways of life, compelling individuals and organizations to seek alternatives to traditional practices. Technological advancements, already on the rise since the advent of the 21st century, became essential tools for navigating the pandemic, particularly as remote work became mandatory at its peak. Individuals and groups were forced to explore virtual alternatives to physical activities, including art exhibitions, as gatherings became restricted. Museums and galleries turned to virtual platforms to host exhibitions, and visual artists adapted by digitally showcasing their artworks, even those created using traditional mediums like ceramics. Reflecting on a digitally remediated ceramic art exhibition, *Iwo Awolo*, held during the pandemic's peak, this study investigates the limits and possibilities of virtual alternatives in curating and viewing artworks created with traditional mediums. The paper discusses my transition to digital options for the *Iwo Awolo* project in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It was a solo exhibition featuring ceramic art installations characterized by tactility, three dimensionality, and the construction and deconstruction of disparate

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art pieces, distinguishing ceramic art from other mediums. The exhibition stemmed from my practice-based doctoral research, where the author served as both researcher and ceramic artist. Organizing a solo exhibition of artworks from my practice was a requirement for completing the research thesis. The author had set up most of the exhibits, with some assistance from studio technicians, before lockdown restrictions were announced in South Africa on March 23, 2020.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper employs a first-person research method to present a collection of thoughts, experiences, and studio notes developed in the process of setting up the project, forming the primary data for the study. Secondary sources of data relied on extant literature, anchoring the study's arguments. The data were collectively analyzed using narrative and explanatory methods. The exhibition is discussed in terms of scope, content, formal features, and conceptual details of the artworks, analyzing the constraints and potentials that digital remediation poses for creative and viewers, particularly concerning genres involving ceramics and other tactile and three-dimensional materials, as seen in the *Iwo Awolo* exhibition. Recommendations are outlined on how digital options can be explored to the best advantage when physical viewership of artworks or artifacts is not feasible. Virtual alternatives in this context are categorized mainly as photos and videos, upon which digital options for viewership rely. While the format of transmission to audiences may differ (including social media, online platforms, live broadcasts, Virtual, Mixed, and Augmented Reality, etc.), it is important to note that each largely depends on photos and videos in some form. In this context, museums and galleries are referred to together, as they both deal with exhibitions of artworks. It is imperative to note that ceramics, the core genre of this study, is a ubiquitous material that not only comprises most archaeological data but has also been practiced by many artists worldwide. Ceramic artworks can be found as part of ancient findings, cultural collections, or recent works by contemporary artists. Additionally, some museums double as art galleries and periodically exhibit and sell artwork by contemporary artists, although this duality is often not expressed in their names or titles. Thus, where only the term "museum" is used, it should also be understood as "gallery." The findings of this study highlight emerging issues in the visual arts as more art organizations and artists explore virtual alternatives to exhibitions and other art projects.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Virtual alternatives to exhibitions: Trends and developments

Faced with health and safety concerns worldwide, museums and art galleries showcasing artists grappled with challenges such as temporary closures, socially distanced routes, and reduced exhibitions, leading to fewer intended and welcomed visits. This limited access for staff, practitioners, and the general audience, prompting a shift to virtual alternatives for putting up and accessing exhibitions (ICOM, 2021). Interestingly, prior to the pandemic, the technological boom since the early 2000s had already prompted some art institutions and creative to explore various online platforms for their exhibitions and public programs. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these changes, highlighting existing issues in the adaptation of digitized options (ICOM, 2021). This relatively recent development also means that studies on its use are an emergent field to date. However, O'Hagan (2021:611) suggests that "discussions of virtual museums, in fact, date back to the 1960s, when museums introduced automation technologies and recognized the potential of computers as 'electronic museums' for the distribution of museum information." A philosophical concept of a 'museum without walls' was later developed by André Malraux. For Malraux (1978), it was an imaginary museum filled with the world's greatest art but free of geographical constraints. According to O'Hagan (2021:612), Malraux's ideas were technically actualized in 1987 when "the software application HyperCard emerged and allowed for non-linear displays in exhibitions and interactive multimedia facilities." In 1994, the Virtual Library of Museums, an early directory of online museums

worldwide, was established. At the time, museums also began to produce CD-ROMs of their collections, making them available for visitors to purchase as take-home souvenirs (Huhtamo, 2010).

While definitions of virtual museums may vary, it can be helpful to outline their defining parameters based on the template provided by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). In a report, ICOM identified three distinct categories of virtual museums: the brochure museum, typically serving as a marketing tool for physical museums; the content museum, often created to make information about museum collections available to the public; and the learning museum, typically education oriented (ICOM, 2004). Although the use of the internet has advanced since the time of publication, virtual museums still fall into these three categories (O'Hagan, 2021). On this note, brochures, CD-ROMs of a museum's collections, and still and motion pictures of exhibitions uploaded on social media and application software enabling viewers to remotely navigate through a museum's exhibition hallway are all forms of virtual alternatives. They each serve as digital options for viewership and employ photos and/or videos.

The popularity and exploration of virtual alternatives to exhibitions further grew with the development of websites, blogs, and social media. These have largely been explored by museums and galleries as virtual options for following their programs and viewing their exhibitions. Usually, they would develop personal websites and blogs and make posts about their exhibits with periodically updated information. Some websites and blogs also serve as a public media service, advertising no particular museum or gallery. Such sites present highlights of key exhibitions in a specific locality or around the world. Like websites and blogs, the ubiquitous use of social media has further facilitated the growth of virtual exhibitions (Chung et al., 2014; O'Hagan, 2021).

It is common to find museums and galleries on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, sharing pictures and videos of their exhibits and interacting with the public in the comment sections. Some of them also share their social media handles at physical exhibitions, so interested persons can continue following their programs whether or not they attend their shows physically. Such interest in online followership demonstrates the value and importance of digital options for participating in their events. This heightened interest in followership is partly brought about by the inclusive and interactive nature of social media spaces. By enabling comments, reactions, and feedback, social media typically encourages viewer participation in forming narratives about artworks (Kim, 2018). Museums have therefore become "audience-driven institutions that focus on collaboration and communication, with a more democratic climate" (Kim, 2018:5).

Virtual alternatives to exhibitions also provide evidence based data for studies such as visitor behaviors (Kempiak et al., 2017), communication factors (Kim, 2018), and educational significance (Lewis et al., 2022; Verde and Valero, 2021; O'Hagan, 2021). Such studies were further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, as many museums and galleries around the world were compelled to operate remotely and therefore relies on virtual alternatives to art exhibitions. In 2021, when lockdown and many safety measures had been eased in many parts of the world, the International Council of Museums still reported that the shift towards digitizing exhibitions had continued "on a massive scale" (ICOM, 2021:5). It further explained that while the long term effects of the pandemic were still unclear, "what is certain is that the COVID-19 crisis has changed museums' perceptions of the digital world forever" (ICOM, 2021:17). Museums, galleries, and art practitioners have continued to digitize their exhibitions, constantly drawing more viewers, followers, and participants across continents.

While interest in virtual exhibitions has continued to grow, it is not surprising that their adaptation has been much easier for picture projects like photography and film. Artworks dealing with textures, tactility, and three dimensional quality face much more complex challenges in digitizing their exhibitions. On this premise, Amorim

and Teixeira (2020), following Groys' (2016) actualization of Benjamin, argued that the digital reproduction of an artwork affects its aura.

When mechanical technologies of reproduction were massively spreading in the 20th century, Benjamin (2000 [1939]) explained that mechanical reproductions typically lacked the ambiance and authenticity felt when a work is experienced at the specific site where it has been installed. He referred to that as the 'here' and 'now' of a work of art (Benjamin, 2000 [1939:273]). Acknowledging this, Groys (2016) asserts that digital reproductions of artworks possess their own aura, albeit different from the physical versions. This means that the aura of digital reproductions is independent of that of the original or physical copy (Amorim and Teixeira, 2020). Groys (2016) and Amorim and Teixeira (2020) agree that the formats of works in genres like photography and films are often not as destabilized by the flatness of computer screens as they are in works created in three-dimensional media like sculpture, ceramics, and installations. Notwithstanding, the shutdown of art venues compelled institutions and practitioners to explore digital remediation. This study is, therefore, a detailed reflection on the experience as virtual alternatives were resorted to in displaying ceramic installations that deal with materiality, site-specificity, and bodily interaction.

***Iwo Awolo*: Project details**

Entitled *Iwo Awolo*, ceramic art installations constitute the bulk of the exhibit. Ceramic arts are works that constitute the basic material, clay. These include works of art in terracotta, stoneware, earthenware, and even greenware; these are all termed ceramics. To expand their creative eloquence, they could also be used alongside, or integrated with, other explorative materials and used to create artworks in genres such as installation. As a postmodern paradigm, installation involves putting together pieces of art elements to form a work (Okoro, 2023; Ene-Orji, 2003). Ene-Orji (2003:13) rightly defined it as "the aggregation of disparate, usually independent units of elements in space to form a composite artwork; this artwork is usually a metaphor that has to be read for associative meanings deducible from the component units." Installation is therefore the composition of pieces of art elements in a given space over a given period of time. Bearing cognizance of these definitions, '*Iwo Awolo'* primarily constitutes ceramics explored alongside other materials to create installation artworks. Tactility and tangibility of forms, as intrinsic to ceramics making and viewership, have continued to hold a major interest in the artistic career over many years (Asogwa et al., 2020). There has also been a constant exploration of materials from the immediate environment, particularly found objects and other earthen matter alongside ceramics. Such constant dialogue with the immediate environment evokes, for countless dramatic and encapsulating tendencies with which to attempt to promote historical and theoretical debates in contemporary ways. This extends to display and curatorial dispositions by challenging, in unique ways, viewers' visual experiences in which carefully positioned. In the *Iwo Awolo* project, displays of disparate elements that form a composite whole as typical of installation make up the bulk of the works; only a few others involve singular elements that form a whole work.

The project cross-examines relations between the processes involved in ceramics making and rites of passage, especially initiation rites. More specifically, it interrogates the creative processes of ceramics and how they simulate themes and theories of initiation rites. For instance, ceramic firing is like the liminal phase of rites, a threshold linking an old state to a new one. It is during firing that the once soft, temporary, slakable clay matter changes its state to a hard, rock-like, and more permanent one. Like in the liminal phase (liminality) of initiation, during which the subject metamorphoses into a new status, ceramic firing therefore transforms a clay body into ceramics. Like in rites of passage, this liminal phase constitutes an irreversible transformation in the creative process. Through artistic experiments and explorations, therefore, the project creatively investigates the relationship between ceramics processes and initiation in terms of key theoretical and thematic parallels such as the threshold, passage/movement, new birth, and resilience, among others. *Iwo Awolo*, a term that closely

translates to ‘sloughing’ and ‘emergence’, encapsulates the idea of this project. Borrowed from the native Igbo background in Southeast Nigeria, *Iwo Awolo* means to shed off the old for a new self to emerge. While the liminalities of rites of passage and ceramics making and possible ways that each can inform the other are interrogated, the native term, *Iwo Awolo*, is employed as the title of this project in an attempt to personalize the experiences of the project and draw the audience into that world of experience. Other detailed ideas about the project are contained in the doctoral thesis and accompanying exhibition catalog (Okafor, 2020a and 2020b).

In this text, therefore, only highlights of the work processes and their intended narratives, as would suffice, are provided. Initially scheduled to take place in April 2020, the complexities of the pandemic and its protocols forced the gallery set-up of the works (which had nearly been completed at the time) to halt until September 2020. In April 2020, public and private institutions in South Africa were ordered to shut down for individuals and groups to stay at home as a means of curbing the spread of the virus. Like in many parts of the world, only health personnel and those with essential duties could go to work, but with explicit permission from the government. For a few weeks, it seemed as if a little patience was all that was needed for the nation and the rest of the world to bounce back to the norm. But the pandemic got worse.

Increasingly, new cases were reported in different parts of the country, Africa, and the world. South Africa, in particular, was later reported as the worst-hit country in Africa and one of the worst five in the world (Burke, 2020). In many parts of the world, such as South Africa, lockdown protocols were further tightened. What was initially aimed at just a few weeks of regulation dramatically spread into several more weeks and many months? The exhibition then took place from September to October 2020, when lockdown orders in South Africa were eased to alert level 1 (Government of South Africa, 2021). At that alert level, movements into various places became possible but were still limited. Only specific staff and students were granted permits on campus. With that, the set-up of the exhibition was completed but still could not invite any audience as initially planned. So, the virtual option was opted for. In essence, while the entirety of the creative process and much of its display happened as though the work would be physically viewed by an audience, virtual alternatives were resorted to. This situation positions the show as a creative force in discussions of the limitations and prospects that digital remediation poses to art exhibitions, especially as more galleries and museums around the world increasingly digitize their art exhibitions.

Artworks in the project

In one of the key works from the *Iwo Awolo* exhibition, titled "Relics from Grandma’s Homestead" (Figure 1), soft malleable clay was impressed between hands, creating material evidence or remains of enactments on the clay. The sacredness and earthen purity often associated with shards and grasses, 555 × 545.75 × 323 cm new birth were underscored with the incorporation of white and pink sea salt into the installation. The work is displayed directly on the gallery floor with no boundaries, allowing viewers to navigate through the forms while observing them. The direct display on the floor and formal intricacies of the wares as collectibles that can easily fit into the palms are intended to excite viewers to interact with the forms in tangible ways while appreciating them.

Similarly, two other works from the project involve earth spread across the floor. One of them, Untitled I, involves sea sand (Figure 2), while the other, an experimental study of clay, entitled ‘Nkpuke’, involves dug earth (Figure 3). Like a sea of worms or waves of an ocean, Untitled I explores 'movement' as the central theme of passage rites. In the studio process, varieties of clay bodies were employed to buttress diversities in clay types and qualities while maintaining a unified creative essence that thematically simulates transitions from one phase of existence to another, as in passage rites. Rites of passage rest on the analogy of social movement described by Van Gennep (2019) as simulating spatial movement from one country, community, or room to another. Like a real doorway,

passage rites signify both exit and entrance—an exit from a distinct social status and an entrance into another. The installation of Untitled I further draws, thematically, from the concept of movement. Composed of over 500 curvilinear forms of various lengths, thicknesses, tones, and colors, this body of work is arranged in a snaky-spiral-like form resembling a sea of worms sliding in an organized mass. Sea sand is explored as a passageway upon which the forms move. The use of sand in the piece strengthens the theme of movement since the sand creates visual connections with the sea, ocean, or other water bodies in motion. In this way, the juxtaposition further consolidates such visual metaphors as water currents and waves as forms of passage. Waves and currents of water bodies, metaphorically, highlight transience, fluidity, and ephemerality. When thinking of these, motion, passage, being in transit, and transitions—all of which support the visual eloquence of the forms in demonstrating passage rites. Additionally, the sea sand effectively creates a color contrast between the work and exhibition floors.

While 'Nkpuke' incorporates dug earth that could crush under the viewers' feet, like in Untitled I, it also involves navigating through layers of mesh-like veils that hang across the ceiling, forming clouds of translucency around the phalluses that make up the work. Being of Igbo origin in Southeast Nigeria, 'Nkpuke' is named after the local term for "inner room", and it is exhibited alone in the inner room of the Jack Heath Gallery. Together with the veils that form shades of obscurity, the positioning of the work and its title are therefore suggestive of secrecy, aloneness, and concealment, which are all common imageries in initiation rites (Van Gennep, [1909] 2019; Turner, 1969). To explore these further, a line of red veils is placed across the doorway to define the threshold leading to this secluded room (Figure 4).

To get into this room, the viewer then crosses over the veils, thereby consciously crossing the threshold and, through this act, interacting with the installation beyond sight.

Likewise, a non-visual engagement is offered in Emerging from the Chrysalis. The installation contemplates the liminal processes of rites of passage and ceramics as rebirth, re-emergence, and regeneration. Specifically, it explores the concept of fire in its two-fold ability as a destructive and generative force. The most common of this two-fold imagery is probably the long-lived bird of Greek mythology that generates itself intermittently in a fire. Referred to as a fire bird, the phoenix is believed to constantly regenerate itself by allowing itself to die and burn in fire, and then its new self is created from the ruins and its ashes. Similarly, the rock-like, permanent, final piece of ceramic ware emerges from the ruins of its firing. This connectedness is easily noticeable in traditional techniques of firing like bon-firing, pit-firing, and raku. To explore this twopronged concept of liminal processes and ceramic firing, two phalluses are fired in a makeshift kiln constructed outside the studio. After firing the phalluses, they are then displayed together with the ruins from the firing. Therefore, the work is composed of firebricks that constituted the kiln walls, freshly doused embers, and ashes from the firing alongside the fired wares (phalluses). Interestingly, the subtle smell of the freshly doused embers and burnt firewood creatively animates the installation (Figure 5a and b).

All these works had been created and set up at the gallery for in-person viewership before the pandemic and its lockdown protocols. To carry on with the exhibition, possible alternatives to showcasing the works to an audience were first investigated and then explored in the project.

Figure 1. *"*Relics from grandma's homestead," 2017. Ceramics and sea salt, variable dimensions.

Figure 2. "Untitled I," 2018, ceramics and sea sand. 600 × 400 × 142 cm.

Figure 3. "Nkpuke, (Phalli series)," 2020. Ceramics, red and white veils, dug earth with clay

Figure 4. Threshold to the exhibition room of Nkpuke.

Figure 5. (a) Make-shift bonfire kiln created by me and used to fire "Emerging from the Chrysalis," 2020. b) "Emerging from the Chrysalis," 2020. Terracotta, firebricks, freshly doused embers and ashes from firing 159 x 175 x 93 cm.

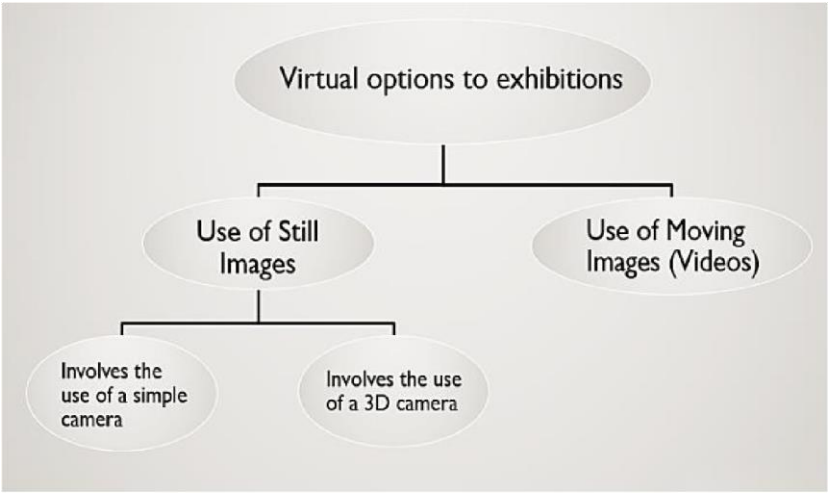

Figure 6. The virtual options for art exhibitions.

Virtual alternatives to art exhibitions

Art institutions across the world have increasingly developed and explored virtual alternatives to showcasing and accessing exhibitions. These virtual alternatives rely heavily on the use of digital images, which may be either still or moving. Below is a diagrammatic representation of these options. Figure 6 shows the virtual options for art exhibitions.

Still images involve simple snapshots of a camera that could be developed into a CD-ROM, brochure, or catalog, while moving images include films or videos. Still images may also be developed into moving images by lining up a series of photographs to play one after another in a smooth sequence. A major advancement in the still option now involves the use of a 3D camera. This option permits viewers to navigate through exhibits either like pedestrians or astronauts, zoom into details of artworks, and move around installations in three dimensions as if physically present in the exhibition space. Also, there has been a boost in each of these options since the onset of the pandemic in late 2019. Particularly, virtual art galleries, where one can upload photographs of artworks to have them exhibited online, have also gained popularity. In each of these options, experiencing an artwork occurs virtually through uploaded images.

The Virtual Reality (VR) option, which involves the use of a 3D camera as well, offers an immersive, individualistic involvement in which viewers may use a combination of headsets and sensor gloves to feel and experience exhibits. As typical of the 3D options, exhibitions in the VR option are often participatory, with viewers deciding where to move or what details to see at a time. However, cost and accessibility to equipment may pose some hindrance to its viewership, especially for those that require sensor gloves. Additionally, such options require viewers to visit a physical space where the 3D digitally copied works are exhibited.

To this end, it has been argued that while VR was once billed to us as a way of bringing strange new worlds into our home, the truth is that the best and most interesting VR experiences are the ones that are impossible to experience outside of a fixed installation (Porges, 2019).

By extrapolation, the location-specificity of traditionally set-up exhibitions requiring viewers to physically visit the art spaces is yet characteristic of VR experiences, especially when holistic viewership is paramount. Like VR, there are Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR) variants. As well as the VR, they are typically location-specific installations. And since the pandemic and its lockdown regulations were still in place, they do not fit into the online options for the show or many others around the world. Online options that would enable viewers to have remote access to the exhibition were sought. To this end, the use of moving images, simple snapshots from cameras, and 3D options that could enable viewers to navigate through spaces by themselves became ready alternatives. While attempting the 3D camera option, the gallery management informed that no other person was welcomed into the gallery aside from the artist. That meant that a technical person who was in contact with to assist with the requisite equipment to take professional 3D shots was not welcome into the gallery based on health and safety concerns at the time. Then, digitizing the exhibition using simple pictures and videos was resorted to. As noted earlier in this text, in line with O'Hagan (2021), ICOM's 2004 three-pronged categorization of virtual museums (or galleries) is still relevant today despite the advancement in the use of virtual platforms like the internet. To reiterate, following ICOM (2004), catalogs, brochures, or soft copies of pictures and videos of exhibitions uploaded online are all forms of virtual alternatives. Each of them provides digitally remediated viewership. So, while resorting to and exploring the still and motion picture options, key observations were made in the curatorial engagement.

CURATORIAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A profound edge found with the online options is that they offer unprecedented access to exhibitions. Because the work was not planned to be shown digitally from the outset of the creative show, it was found that digitizing it enabled reaching a much larger audience. With no limitations to time, space, or geography, as opposed to physical gatherings, a wider global viewership is now available. In addition, in the online format, the exhibition could be shown in its original presentation repeatedly. For in-person gatherings, a body of work, as in a solo exhibition, loses its original presentation once dismantled from the gallery. This could happen due to sales, gifting, various forms of loss, etc., occurring during or after its first show. In such situations, access to the works collectively is lost, except perhaps in traveling exhibitions where the same body of works is set up in different locations at different times. However, some works assume different forms with each new installation. For instance, multiple installation options are explorable with Untitled I (Figure 2), and re-installing the work in the exact same way as the original installation is almost impossible based on the number of units, curviness, and color variations of the work. Also, while installing the work, the pieces sometimes slip off the hand to the floor and break, thereby increasing the number of ceramic elements in the work and, by implication, further defying precision in its possible re-installation. Thinking through cracks and breakage/snaps to which ceramic forms are susceptible, contemplation arises that when such happens, especially to a large piece, and while the work is yet to be installed or still being installed, the situation could be double-faceted online viewership. First, the virtual

alternatives could promote some helpful cover-up of a damaged work since the curator (or, as in the case, curator-artist) decides what parts of the work to show or not. Even in the 3D options, providing detailed views of each piece (or what parts to flaunt) is largely subject to the disposition of the curator. By positive implication, therefore, the accident is effectively covered up, and the artist may have more time to recreate that piece if need be. On the other hand, the same cover-up may become deceitful, depending on the intent of the curator. As such, damaged wares or roughly finished works can be digitally embellished or subjected to selective detailing in terms of photography and videography. Thus, one finds that in online or virtual viewing, appreciation of artwork or installation becomes more subjective than objective in that it becomes difficult to discover certain details for oneself except those that have been permitted by the curator.

Furthermore, on the negative implications, opting for online options disengaged some tangible essence in the exhibit. As a visual artist who foregrounds the tactility and tangibility of art forms and materiality, engagement with the audience beyond their senses of sight was planned. However, that was largely suppressed when the works were digitized for online viewing. In Untitled I (Figure 2), for instance, sea sand forms part of the work, and its installation is intended to encroach on viewers' spaces such that they cannot appreciate the work effectively without partly stepping onto the sand.

By interacting with the work this way, the sand crushes underneath the viewers' feet, thereby creating an immediate feel and a sensual connection for viewers and a form of collaboration between them and the work. In this collaboration, footprints left by the viewer were intended to appear as patterns in the sea sand. That would then cause the work to look slightly different per time as viewers visit and leave its space. Similar nonvisual engagements are also intended for '*Nkpuke*' and *Emerging from the Chrysalis* (Figures 3 to 5). In '*Nkpuke*', tiny balls of dug earth that spread across the exhibition floor were intended to be crushed with each visit to the space. Through the work, the concept of threshold, which is largely definitive of the entire discourse on rites of passage, is explored. To physically get into the exhibition room of '*Nkpuke*', one is forced to cross this threshold that has been marked out with a red veil. In this way, the viewer is drawn closer to 'experiencing' the art installation rather than just 'seeing' it with the eyes. Again, while in the room and viewing the work, one may find oneself navigating through the white veils forming layers of obscurity in the room. Likewise, the subtle smell in *Emerging from the Chrysalis* (Figure 5), which creatively animates the exhibit, is designed to engage the audience or viewers beyond their sense of sight such that the work equally engages their olfactory sense in its appreciation—something that cannot be transmitted via pictures (still or moving).

Consequently, tangible ways that had been strategized for the viewership experience beyond sight were filtered out as the transition to the online/digitized format occurred. Viewers could only be left with explanations for these extra experiences. Therefore, supporting texts for the exhibits were provided. For a work like Relics from Grandma's Homestead (Figure 1), composed of bits and pieces, with some appearing like small-sized collectibles that may easily fit in a palm, which was hoped to excite the viewers' sense of touch and play, the tactile experience was left up to the imagination. Lastly, it was found that the socialization and interactions that often occur among participants (curators, artists, and viewers, alike) in physical shows are largely reduced in the virtual options as each person views the event from their homes and at different moments. Perhaps this means less critique of the artworks and of the artists.

Pros	Cons
1) The virtual alternatives provide the ability to reach a wider audience in terms of time, space and geography. 2) They offer the ability to show the work in its original presentation, recurrently. 3) In case of accidents, they permit some helpful cover-up.	) In case of accidents, they permit some deceitful cover-up. 2) The virtual alternatives make appreciation of artwork or installation more subjective than objective. 3) They cannot engage other senses of 'seeing' except visuals and sounds. 4) Socialization and interactions that often occur in physical shows are, in the virtual options, reduced for both artists and viewers (this may mean less critique on the artworks/artist).

Figure 7. Pros and cons of the virtual options.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

While the possibilities around virtual alternatives to art exhibitions are continuously explored by museums and galleries around the world, those alternatives are considered to partly stretch the exhibiting contours of how art, particularly those in traditional media, is consumed. In the *Iwo Awolo* project, the artworks were completely set up at the Jack Heath Gallery as they would in any physical exhibition before resorting to virtual alternatives based on lockdown restrictions. Through that experience, therefore, the challenges and prospects of virtual art exhibitions have been interrogated. Summarily, Figure 7 is a tabulated outline of the field observations showing the pros and cons of the virtual options.

While these issues stare the art world in the face, it must be accepted that the world may never go back to the way anyone knew it. So far, there have been multiple variants of the coronavirus across the world. WHO (2023:1) warns that "COVID-19 remains a major threat" to date. Its member states are currently encouraged to maintain their COVID-19 infrastructure. Based on these, it is expected that various forms of digitization will increasingly be embraced as the 'new normal'. Digital remediation has come to stay. Hopefully, its continuous acceptance will facilitate the development of advanced options that can offer as much real-life experience as possible. At the time being, however, a combination of inperson and virtual alternatives may be good options for art institutions and artists to continue to explore, where socially possible.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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