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The Pink Cube: Exploring Aesthetic Art Experience and Play in Instagram Museums

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The Pink Cube

Exploring Aesthetic Art Experience and Play in Instagram Museums

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Abstract

This research discusses an in-depth analysis of the novel entertainment-based institutions coined as Instagram Museums, in terms of the aesthetic art experiences and play driven interactions that they provide. By differentiating between two distinct types of Instagram Museums, the gallery-like and the museum-like, the analysis is led through two case studies, the Museum of Ice Cream and the Museum Voorlinden. While these institutions have a strong social media component shaping their exhibitions, they use separate business models based on the contrasting cultural status retained. Most importantly this includes original approaches to the experience obtained within the space by growing visitor engagement both through the aesthetic appeal and the participatory nature of the exhibits. Instagram Museums aim to provide entertaining experiences that can be beautifully captured with a phone and become Instagram bait, bringing in increasingly more visitors. In doing so, the spaces feature installations that offer high levels of immersion and interactivity, turning the often passive engagement encountered in traditional museums into veritable acts of play. By bringing in some online conducted interviews alongside the theoretical analysis of the topics, this thesis argues for the reconfiguration of the (traditional) museum experience through the construction of more aesthetically appealing interactive encounters.

Keywords: Instagram, aesthetics, play, art experience, contemporary museums.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Phenomenon of Instagram Museums	8
Considering Museums' Definition	8
Gallery-like Instagram Museum: Museum of Ice Cream	9
Museum-like Instagram Museum: Museum Voorlinden	17
Chapter 2: Art and Aesthetic Experience	22
Contemporary Installation Art	22
Aesthetics and Aesthetic Experience	23
Art vs. Non-art	26
Rupture and the Transitional Space	28
Instagram's Effect on Museum Experience	31
Chapter 3: Play in the Art Museum	40
Play through Cultural Analysis	41
Play through Psychoanalysis - Winnicott	45
Playing (on) Instagram	48
Play in the Instagram Museum	50
Epilogue - Recommendations for Traditional Museums	54
Image List	58
Image Sources	63
Bibliography	63

Introduction

Museal institutions are currently on the verge of a crucial stage of transformation as increasingly more entertainment-based establishments monopolize the attention of audiences. This competition between the trusted and the experiential institutions has been mainly caused by two factors: the rise of interactive and immersive installations starting in the 1960s, and more recently, the technological advancements which have made phone photography and thereby photographic social media inescapable.¹ Yayoi Kusama, one of the most influential artists of the 20th and 21st centuries can be considered a key figure in this development of the art world. Her room-sized hallucinatory installations, called *Infinity Rooms* (Fig. 1), invite each visitor to interact with and even alter the spaces of her artworks, offering them a variety of textured surfaces or arming them with round colorful stickers.² Starting from the desire to share and recreate her own hallucinatory episodes for an audience, Kusama's *Infinity Rooms* have become some of the most sought after works for social media art enthusiasts, as they provide powerful immersive experiences that keep their aesthetic character even when transferred to a screen.³ It is hereby not a coincidence that her artworks have become almost synonymous with Instagram aesthetics, being portrayed by the media as "Instagram's Infinity Rooms" and "an Instagramer's Dream."⁴ While it may appear as if this demand for experiential, immersive spaces is a complete novelty, in truth it has been nurtured by artists such as Kusama, James Turrell or Allan Kaprow for many decades.⁵

Simultaneously with this artistic tendency, came the invention of the Internet, the creation of social media platforms and the rise of the smartphone. The phone has not

¹ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 16.

² Applin, *Yayoi Kusama*, 3.

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ See Mia Feitel, "The Japanese Artist You're About To See All Over Instagram," *Elle*, 2019, <https://www.elle.com/culture/a29726826/yayoi-kusama-infinity-room-macys-parade/> and Betty Wood, "Yayoi Kusama Museum is an Instagramer's dream," *The Spaces*, <https://thespaces.com/yayoi-kusamas-tokyo-museum-is-an-instagramers-dream/>

⁵ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 162; Naomi Rea, "As Museums Fall in Love With 'Experiences,' Their Core Missions Face Redefinition," *Artnet News*, 2019. Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/experience-economy-museums-1486807>.

only become a primary tool for socialization and communication, but also a means of constant entertainment and a replacement of the traditional camera. In their book on Instagram, Internet studies researchers Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin analyse not only how the platform functions, but also how it has become so popular, arguing that everyday visuals are framed by our phones becoming almost inseparable.”⁶ This points to a trans- or perhaps even posthumanist understanding of contemporary society, in which our phones have become inseparable from our bodies. It has become a tool for recording everyday life, foregrounding the visual character of experiences.⁷ In addition to the role of remembrance, the development of social media platforms has heightened the desire to share photographs, creating visual and aesthetic communities, and turning snapshots into a social currency.⁸ Having started as a retro, Polaroid mimicking photo sharing social media platform, Instagram has since altered its look and approach to become more adaptable to its users, hereby turning into a central player in the experience economy.⁹ Through its options for likes, comments or direct message sharing, Instagram maintains a strong communication focus alongside its editing and photographing applicability, hereby crafting social aesthetic communities.¹⁰ On this aspect Leaver, Highfield and Abidin argue that the visual is the most influential factor as the discussions and relationships that develop on the platform are constructed based on the content shared, ultimately shaping the interactions through images.¹¹ The platform features its own social order and system, in which the visual is of utmost importance. While it began as an unprofitable endeavour, through the introduction of advertisements, Instagram as a business has become increasingly lucrative, both for the platform and for so-called influencers with a large following.¹² Similarly to other popular social media platforms, for some Instagram is no longer just a social network, but a veritable profession, displaying multiple content foci and approaches.

⁶ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 43.

⁷ Budge, “Objects in Focus,” 68; Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 216.

⁸ Carly Straughan, “Is Instagram Culture a Positive Influence for Museums?” *Museum Next*. 2019. Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/is-instagram-culture-a-positive-influence-for-museums/>.

⁹ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

With a rising demand for aesthetic backdrops for Instagram, new businesses have emerged in which experience and current visual trends take center stage.¹³ Arguably the largest up-and-coming institution of this sort is the Instagram Museum, which has seen constant growth in popularity since first appearing in the early 2010s.¹⁴ These spaces are carefully curated to match the aesthetics of its audience by using colors such as *millennial pink*, and basing its exhibitions on a beloved topic, such as pizza, ice cream or simply 'happiness'. The creators of Instagram Museums concentrate on providing entertainment by distancing themselves from traditional museums, hereby offering a new leisure activity for its visitors.¹⁵ Welcoming above all committed Instagram users, which according to statista.com mainly belong to the category of 18 to 34 year olds, the museums are a more extreme, yet real life adaptation of current online trends.¹⁶ Often compared to an adult Disneyland, Instagram Museums primarily offer an experience, as much through the space and installations as through the specific ritual that they imply.¹⁷ According to Leaver, Highfield and Abidin this encompasses the rush of snatching a ticket, the long waiting lines, the posing and editing of pictures within the space and often receiving free samples.¹⁸

Throughout the past years, this development in the entertainment sector has been leaving its mark on more traditional museums as well. Art museums throughout the world have started to adapt to current demands by embracing museum photography and focusing on displaying large, immersive installation art.¹⁹ While they remain powerful cultural institutions, some art museums are starting to actively shift towards a more open approach to social media, thereby detaching themselves from the traditional museal norms and resonating increasingly more with those of Instagram Museums. This

¹³ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 161; Sophie Haigney, "The Museums of Instagram," Culture Desk. The New Yorker. 2018. Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-museums-of-instagram>.

¹⁴ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 159.

¹⁵ Bunn, Maryellis, "Everything You Think You Know About the Museum of Ice Cream Is Wrong: Interview With CEO," Interview by Sissi Cao, October 9, 2019, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://observer.com/2019/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn-funding-interview/>.

¹⁶ Statista, "Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of January 2021, by age group," 2021, Accessed: 19 April 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/>.

¹⁷ Sophie Haigney, "The Museums of Instagram," Culture Desk, The New Yorker, 2018, Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-museums-of-instagram>.

¹⁸ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 160.

¹⁹ Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum*, 17.

developing dialogue between the colorful Instagram backdrops, from here on referred to as gallery-like Instagram Museums, and art museums which have embraced social media, coined museum-like Instagram Museums, is crucial to the changes and advancements that are currently necessary in the museum industry.²⁰

In order to analyse these connections and influences between the two types of institutions, there are two central elements that must be considered, namely the effects of the aesthetic or art experience and the interactivity that takes place within the installations. The former has been the focus of many artists since the middle of the 20th century, but was also adapted to other industries as an attempt to reel in young people who were mainly choosing online experiences over palpable ones.²¹ Currently, the idea of (aesthetic) experience, especially in close relation to social media platforms stands at the center of our society, shifting the demand for activities and displays. As what can perhaps be viewed as an extension of the desire for experience, the interactivity that takes place in Instagram Museums is crucial to the impact of such spaces. This immersion and interaction with the props or installations has a fun, enjoyable character, and can be more accurately described as a form of play.²²

These facets of Instagram Museums are critical for research on the topic, as they provide a theoretical framework for an otherwise lacking field. Outside of Caleb Stockham's dissertation, there has been very little empirical academic research conducted on the phenomenon of Instagram Museums.²³ Both Stockham's and Leaver, Highfield and Abidin's research on this subject has been conducted through the gathering of information deriving from newspaper and magazine articles, as unlike the academic field, the media has shown a clear interest in this sociocultural development.²⁴ This is a curious situation as the relationship between Instagram Museums and more traditional art museums has become undeniable and has the potential of becoming beneficial for

²⁰ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 46-47.

²¹ Naomi Rea, "As Museums Fall in Love With 'Experiences,' Their Core Missions Face Redefinition," *Artnet News*, 2019, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/experience-economy-museums-1486807>.

²² Van Vleet and Feeney, "Play Behaviour and Playfulness," 632.

²³ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 25.

²⁴ See: Caleb Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?", 2019 and Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, 2020.

both types of institutions. While traditional museums have a rising urgency for securing funds and are becoming increasingly insignificant for many social collectives, Instagram Museums are growing effortlessly. This suggests that more research into the latter, in order to gain a complete understanding of their functions and methods, and a more open exchange, could be constructive and profitable for both sides.²⁵

In addition to the theoretical framework, two case studies have been selected for a more precise examination of these spaces. As the first and most successful of its kind, the Museum of Ice Cream (from here on called MoIC), provides an excellent glimpse into the gallery-like Instagram Museum business. Founded by Maryellis Bunn and Manish Vora in 2016, the MoIC was envisioned in the form of a pop-up, travelling throughout the United States for multiple months.²⁶ Having had unbelievable success, selling 300.000 tickets only in its first five days, two permanent locations have been recently opened in New York and San Francisco.²⁷ While each version of the museum has offered some new elements, the general colorful and playful concept as well as the ice cream theme have been maintained. As a contrasting case study, displaying the purpose and approaches of a museum-like Instagram Museum, the Museum Voorlinden, an European art museum that features famous large scale installations has been selected. Surrounded by nature in the small city of Wassenaar, the Netherlands, the Voorlinden is a private art museum with an impressive collection of artworks by Richard Serra, Leandro Erlich and James Turrell among others, which focuses on producing a unique visitor experience.²⁸ Alongside the permanent collection, the museum houses multiple temporary exhibitions, thus constantly offering new content.²⁹

Taking into consideration the potential of this scarce theoretical field, this thesis focuses on analysing Instagram Museums by foregrounding their progress in

²⁵ Høffding, Rung and Roald, "Participation and Receptivity," 71.

²⁶ Sophie Haigney, "The Museums of Instagram." Culture Desk, The New Yorker, 2018, Accessed: 12 March 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-museums-of-instagram>; Anna Wiener. "The Millennial Walt Disney," New York Magazine, 2017, Accessed: 15 March 2021. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn.html>.

²⁷ Jelisa Castrodale, "The Museum of Ice Cream Is Worth 200 Million Somehow, Please Help," Vice, 2019, Accessed: 10 June 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d3a83j/the-museum-of-ice-cream-is-worth-dollar200-million-somehow-please-help>.

²⁸ Museum Voorlinden, Accessed: 20 March 2021, <https://www.voorlinden.nl/?lang=en>.

²⁹ Ibid.

emphasizing aesthetic (art) experience, and encouraging acts of play to take place. These two approaches are crucial to the future development of the traditional art museum, as they are currently some of the most sought after activities and sensations. Hereby, the following dissertation aims to discuss the question: to what extent can Instagram Museums contribute to the field of museology in terms of art experience and play, as exemplified by the Museum of Ice Cream and the Museum Voorlinden? This question will be approached through a theoretical framework of art and aesthetic experience, as well as adult play. These are crucial elements to understanding the role of Instagram Museums as they depend on their aesthetic character to impress Instagram users and attract visitors through the promise of an entertaining experience. In order to further support the theoretical claims, I have conducted a series of online interviews with visitors of the MoIC and the Museum Voorlinden, granting the argument a basis in empirical research. After consulting Mike Crang and Ian Cook's book *Doing Ethnographies*, I decided to conduct written, semi-structured interviews via email, giving the participants a broad framework through open questions.³⁰ By selecting this method the participants could take their time to respond, thereby leading to a more relaxed experience which would allow them to be more open and reflective.³¹ As this research focuses on Instagram Museums and the influence of social media on the museum experience, the participants were selected through Instagram. In order to find people willing to do the interview I created an Instagram account specifically for this research and focused on selecting users through the hashtag section by searching for #museumoficecream and #museumvoorlinden, looking at both the 'recent' and 'top posts' sections. Out of 203 thousand posts appearing under #museumoficecream and 31.9 thousand posts under #museumvoorlinden, I examined approximately 500-600 posts for each hashtag, selecting pictures which looked edited and curated, and that featured the main user of the account. I followed each account before sending them a direct message explaining the scope of my research and asking if they would be willing to participate. Out of a total of approximately 100 people contacted, 24 responded with a positive answer, and only 6 women filled out the email interview. In order to gather more participants, I also asked my fellow classmates that had

³⁰ Crang and Cook, *Doing Ethnographies*, 60.

³¹ Ibid., 66.

visited the Voorlinden to respond to the interview and hereby gained two more participants. There were 12 questions in total, split into four categories: introductory (who, when and why), art experience, play, and lastly traditional vs. Instagram Museum.³² These interviews will appear throughout the thesis to support the links made between the theory on art experience and play and the Instagram Museum case studies, creating a more clear image of how these institutions function.

With the aim of maintaining a clear structure, the research is organized into three distinct chapters, each building towards a comprehensive analysis of Instagram Museums. The first chapter discusses how the two types of museums function by observing the branding, concepts and aims of the MoIC and the Museum Voorlinden in order to set up a framework for the role these spaces play in the current cultural landscape. This is done with (partial) regard to the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) definition of museums and how each of the institutions abides by or deviates from it. Following this essential overview of the functionality of Instagram Museums, chapter two delves into a more theoretical investigation of art and aesthetic experience, considering the importance of these elements in the context of social media driven spaces. In order to do so, it begins with a characterization of installation art, succeeded by a discussion on the fundamentals of aesthetic taste. Throughout this section there will also be an unpacking of the foundation of art experience theorizing through the introduction of Donald W. Winnicott's transitional space, which will be rounded off with the effects of Instagram on the proposed theory. The consecutive chapter discusses a cultural and an analytical approach to playing, through the writings of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Donald W. Winnicott, concluding with the influence of social media on the playful interactions taking place in Instagram Museums. Finally, in the form of an epilogue, the last chapter functions not only as a summary of the examined theories, but also investigates their possible applications in traditional art museums and the improvements that they could generate.

³² The presented research corresponds to a specific group of people in the current era and situation, and should not be taken unquestionably as a generalization of this phenomenon for the upcoming years, considering the swift changes in social media trends.

Chapter 1: The Phenomenon of Instagram Museums

Considering Museums' Definition

The definition of a museum has been and still is a widely debated topic, as it is crucial to the industry, but also delicate to determine because of their many facets. As the leading organization in the museological field, ICOM's definition is generally taken as the standard, hereby making it an important element in the discussion of new museal institutions. Even though it has been contested frequently in the past years, the current definition has remained unchanged since 2007. Presently, ICOM characterizes a museum as follows:

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”³³

This description focuses primarily on the aims and functions of the museum in terms of its educational and preservative duty to society, providing a somewhat constraining framework for the various roles that a museum can inhabit. Museums are often ruled by a deliberately selected order through which they display objects or share narratives and knowledge, maintaining a carefully curated image.³⁴ Moreover, most of the viewers who are interested in and consistently visit museums, are highly-educated people, who often already possess at least a basic level of knowledge of the objects featured, thus retaining the sense of an elitist standing of such institutions.³⁵

What these attitudes do not take into consideration is the influence of the visitor. An audience comes with a personal context, background and interpretation, which is

³³ ICOM, “Museum Definition,” 2007, Accessed: 19 April 2021, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

³⁴ Smith and Wolf, “Museum Visitor Preferences,” 220.

³⁵ Smith and Wolf, “Museum Visitor Preferences,” 235; Høffding, Rung and Roald, “Participation and Receptivity,” 69.

crucial to the actual role of the museum in society, as opposed to its theoretical purpose.³⁶ This aspect seems to get lost in the current definitions and understandings of the museological institution, as they often continue to value the power of the organization and objects over the interaction with the audience. As museums are becoming increasingly less relevant for people, considering their focus on a selected agenda rather than an openness to dialogue, their standing in society is deteriorating.³⁷ Consequently, it is becoming imperative for all museums to actively pursue a progression towards what Eilean Hooper-Greenhill terms the 'post-museum', in which visitors, their needs and influences are not just welcomed but integrated and responded to.³⁸ Researchers Simon Høffding, Mette Rung and Tone Roald consider museums to be ideally a space of social interaction where there is an open dialogue between the displayed objects and the visitors, promoting personal expression among the audience, thereby allowing for an open discourse which accommodates all social voices.³⁹

Gallery-like Instagram Museum: Museum of Ice Cream

As it began as a limited, travelling exhibition, the concept of pop-up stands at the heart of the initial success of the MoIC. According to philosopher and cultural heritage researcher Silvia Giordano: "the Pop-Up Museum could be considered as a short-term institution, mobile museum or outdoor exhibit, created outside the confines of its traditional location, in existing temporary and unexpected places, with strong community anchors and the aim of enhancing civic engagement."⁴⁰ There are thus three key elements to a pop-up, namely: its impermanence, carefully selected location and high traffic attraction. This phenomenon appeared as a reaction to the 2008 financial crisis, as an inexpensive opportunity for businesses to bring in large crowds and profits.⁴¹ From the start, a pop-up linked a short-term experience with novelty, introducing an element of discovery and a

³⁶ Smith and Wolf, "Museum Visitor Preferences," 220.

³⁷ Høffding, Rung and Roald, "Participation and Receptivity," 71.

³⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation*, 152.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁰ Giordano, "Pop-Up Museums," 462.

⁴¹ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 13.

clear focus on its visitor interaction.⁴² In turn, this factor generated a sense of exclusivity, as not everyone would know about or get the chance to visit the fleeting pop-up.⁴³ Considering that social media has become our present word-of-mouth, journalist Manuel Charr explains the importance of this exclusive business model in terms of social media, by arguing that limited access is one of the most effective ways to create the necessary social media buzz, a phenomenon which decreases the longer an exhibition is open for.⁴⁴ While pop-ups are popularized through social media, making them highly desirable experiences, they can only maintain their success for a short period of time by remaining exclusive.⁴⁵ Pop-ups welcome photographs for social media, as it is their main source of advertisement, their success being dependent on the manner in which the space translates to the virtual realm and its online response.⁴⁶ As one of the first of its kind, the MoIC became successful overnight through Instagram and has maintained a cult-like following, having more than 200k posts under the hashtag #museumoficecream.⁴⁷ Conforming with this phenomenon, interview participants stated that they had visited the MoIC due to its social media popularity, being incited by the images they were exposed to online to visit the space for themselves. Having seen the colorful installations on Instagram, Amy, Bianca and Clara already had high expectations for the experience to be fun and aesthetically pleasing – both for them and their followers – and indeed the MoIC did not fail to live up to their expectations.⁴⁸ Attracting them with a sense of exclusivity and leaving them feeling entertained, all three were excited to post their pictures, expecting similarly positive reactions from their followers. By creating this combined experience of exclusive amusement, the MoIC furthers its brand's image by growing its online presence through every visitor that decides to share a visual of the space.

⁴² Ibid., 10.

⁴³ Giordano "Pop-Up Museums," 461.

⁴⁴ Manuel Charr, "What we can learn from Pop-Up Museums? Best practice and ideas from Instagram friendly experiences," Museum Next, 2019, Accessed: 12 March 2021.
<https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-we-can-learn-from-pop-up-museums-best-practice-and-ideas-from-instagram-friendly-experiences/>.

⁴⁵ Giordano, "Pop-Up Museums," 462.

⁴⁶ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 10.

⁴⁷ Instagram, "#museumoficecream," Accessed: 4 June 2021,
<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/museumoficecream/>.

⁴⁸ The names of the participants have been changed in order to maintain their privacy.

Even though the current use of pop-ups is primarily aimed at for-profit brand activation, and is hereby seemingly far removed from the cultural field, they are ultimately the successors of traditional museums' temporary exhibitions.⁴⁹ The fundamental concept of a limited and thus attractive opportunity remained the same, with the addition of an even more detached and intriguing location. Pop-ups are placed in central, urban, easily reachable locations, which popularize the area and adapt to the environment they find themselves in.⁵⁰ Following this method, the MoIC in New York was placed across the street from the Whitney Museum of American Art, while in Los Angeles it chose a location in the Arts District, featuring a room that was dedicated to California.⁵¹ As a result, such spots that already have a moderate popularity, end up booming in traffic once an Instagram Museum settles in the region.

Taking into account their fleeting nature, changing location and focus on being a novelty, a pop-up museum already falls out of what ICOM would consider to be a museum. Even if pop-ups are linked to larger permanent institutions, they themselves (can) have a different essence. They prioritise their exclusivity and hereby desirability over other objectives such as education or research, functioning as highly entertaining spaces. While ICOM does also categorise the museum as a form of entertainment, it does not accept it as its singular or primary purpose. Consequently, any exhibition or museum that operates within such a temporary, recreational framework, would currently still remain out of the bounds of the accepted traditional museum definition.

Gallery-like Instagram Museums have managed to access the growing desire for personalized, yet also aesthetically curated experiences.⁵² These institutions emphasize an enjoyable, immersive experience over an educational one, keeping up with current Instagram fads. In line with the popularization of specific color shades, such as millennial

⁴⁹ Giordano, "Pop-Up Museums," 462.

⁵⁰ Manuel Charr, "What we can learn from Pop-Up Museums? Best practice and ideas from Instagram friendly experiences," Museum Next, 2019, Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-we-can-learn-from-pop-up-museums-best-practice-and-ideas-from-instagram-friendly-experiences/>.

⁵¹ Alyssa Bereznak, "Can Real Life Compete With an Instagram Playground?" The Ringer, 2017, Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.theringer.com/tech/2017/8/9/16110424/instagram-playground-social-media>.

⁵² Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 11; 14.

pink, the MoIC consistently uses a bright pink hue that has become part of their brand identity, a method that is applied by most spaces through the selection of one dominant color that suits the general theme (Fig. 2).⁵³ Going even further than just the selection of a predominant tint, Instagram Museums feature a specific theme that ties the installations together, often opting for a food related concept.⁵⁴ A unifying theme that bases itself on Instagram trends, lends an Instagram Museum a certain visual templatability both on- and offline. Trendy restaurants, foods and drinks make up a large part of Instagram posts more generally, having the benefit of being universal at their core and hereby influencing the content that users wish to photograph.⁵⁵ Avocados, rosé wine and even eggs have already been the inspiration of various Instagram Museums throughout the United States.⁵⁶ Such alimentary themes provide the opportunity of unity within the museum and most importantly, they carry the promise of a multisensory experience. Similarly, the MoIC's rooms each feature something that you can taste, smell or touch (Fig. 3), and for the grand finale, visitors can buy a treat from the museum's own ice cream shop (Fig. 4).⁵⁷ Focusing on the universally beloved snack, the establishment creates instant captivation of audiences, assuring a colorful, sweet and edible experience. Bianca was so focused on this aspect of the MoIC, that the single scoop of ice cream she was offered became a critique of the experience. However, even so, the overall enjoyment was not affected too strongly as there was still a large selection of experiences to be had, showcasing the importance of the MoIC' variety in maintaining a strong sense of engagement.

According to the creator of the MoIC, Maryellis Bunn, her establishments and similar hotspots should be understood as so-called 'experiums'; a combination between

⁵³ Anna Wiener, "The Millennial Walt Disney," New York Magazine, 2017, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn.html>.

⁵⁴ Sophie Haigney, "The Museums of Instagram," Culture Desk, The New Yorker, 2018, Accessed: 12 March 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-museums-of-instagram>.

⁵⁵ Casey Newton, "Instagram is Pushing Restaurants to be Kitschy, Colorful, and Irresistible to Photographers," The Verge, 2017, Accessed: 16 April 2021. <https://www.theverge.com/2017/7/20/16000552/instagram-restaurant-interior-design-photo-friendly-media-noche>.

⁵⁶ Jessica Liew, "11 Photogenic Food Museums To Visit To Get Everyone Drooling On Instagram," Philippines Tatler, 2018, Accessed: 20 March 2021. <https://ph.asiatatler.com/life/photogenic-food-museums-that-will-get-everyone-drooling-on-instagram>.

⁵⁷ Anna Wiener, "The Millennial Walt Disney," New York Magazine, 2017, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn.html>.

a museum and an experience.⁵⁸ Inspired by the impact of aesthetic art experiences, Instagram Museums feature a new take on visitor-object encounters. The creators of such institutions place the viewer at the center, providing a seemingly personalized experience for each visitor, within a space that attracts and entices them. The installations are extreme yet palpable renditions of Instagram fads, enhancing the sense of uniqueness of the space. The influence of Instagram has become so large, that it is currently shaping not only society's digital preferences, but the real world. Leaver, Highfield and Abidin comment on this phenomenon by saying that the constant desire to ensure that all experiences had on a daily basis are worthy of being shared on Instagram is reestablishing the interests of our society.⁵⁹ Instagram Museums showcase the latest and perhaps to date most extreme impact of virtual reality on everyday life, curating experiences that are highly enjoyable and look beautiful on any feed. Even though Bunn refutes that the MoIC was built for Instagram, they have effortlessly accommodated the platform's demands.⁶⁰ From the selected lighting to the designated posing spots, the MoIC not only represents, but imposes Instagram aesthetics on its visitors.⁶¹

What has differentiated Instagram Museums from other entertainment institutions, has been their focus on interactivity and engagement with the spaces and objects. According to Stockham it is precisely this invitation to actively explore the space and lose yourself in it that has kept crowds so interested.⁶² Through the implementation of Instagram aesthetics and hereby the creation of an environment which is considered beautiful, unique and overall exclusive, audiences are no longer content with simply photographing singular elements, but rather want to show that they had the opportunity

⁵⁸ Bunn, Maryellis, "Everything You Think You Know About the Museum of Ice Cream Is Wrong: Interview With CEO," Interview by Sissi Cao, October 9, 2019, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://observer.com/2019/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn-funding-interview/>.

⁵⁹ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 213.

⁶⁰ Manuel Charr, "What we can learn from Pop-Up Museums? Best practice and ideas from Instagram friendly experiences." Museum Next. 2019. Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-we-can-learn-from-pop-up-museums-best-practice-and-ideas-from-instagram-friendly-experiences/>; Arielle Pardes, "Selfie Factories: The Rise of the Made-for-Instagram Museum," Condé Nast, 2017, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/selfie-factories-instagram-museum/>.

⁶¹ Alyssa Bereznak, "Can Real Life Compete With an Instagram Playground?" The Ringer, 2017, Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.theringer.com/tech/2017/8/9/16110424/instagram-playground-social-media>.

⁶² Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 49.

of being part of such a space. Moreover, the sense of exclusivity is heightened by the many visits of celebrities, making these institutions even more attractive online.⁶³ Desiring to be included in the context of the activity at hand, audiences demand to become central elements in the spaces they are visiting and be given the opportunity to adapt the exhibitions to their own preferences.⁶⁴ The possibility of customisation of the space and interaction, creates an exceptional alternative to the strict narratives imposed by the traditional museum. Stockham comments on this important facet of Instagram Museums arguing that they are intentionally designed to maximize interaction, however the type of engagement, even in terms of route and duration, is entirely the visitor's choice and hereby differs largely from the 'single path' style of traditional exhibitions.⁶⁵ Shifting the power to change an exhibition from the museum to the visitors themselves, changes the way in which objects can be perceived and influences the overall impact of an experience. In Instagram Museums, this craving for interactivity translates to the constant use of phones in the installations, in order to capture the perfect photograph to post online, giving the sensation of a closer relationship between the person and the objects. The published selfie hereby becomes a testament to the status of the user and even elevates the standing of the institution.

Even though it is a primarily entertainment-focused establishment, the MoIC attempts to bring in snippets of information throughout its exhibition. There are posters and wall writings which inform its visitors of fun, ice-cream-related facts, which could be easily found online.⁶⁶ This practice aims to mirror the educational role maintained by a traditional museum through the knowledge it keeps and shares. Having been named the 'Museum' of Ice Cream, there is a certain educational expectation that visitors have upon

⁶³ Alyssa Bereznak, "Can Real Life Compete With an Instagram Playground?" *The Ringer*, 2017. Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.theringer.com/tech/2017/8/9/16110424/instagram-playground-social-media>.

⁶⁴ Carly Straughan, "Is Instagram Culture a Positive Influence for Museums?" *Museum Next*. 2019. Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/is-instagram-culture-a-positive-influence-for-museums/>.

⁶⁵ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 49.

⁶⁶ Alyssa Bereznak, "Can Real Life Compete With an Instagram Playground?" *The Ringer*, 2017, Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.theringer.com/tech/2017/8/9/16110424/instagram-playground-social-media>.

entering the space, and through the superficial data displayed, the Instagram Museum can keep up its status. While Bunn states that choosing the name museum may have been a mistake that leads to inaccurate assumptions about what the establishment has to offer, it continues to be used by new Instagram Museums.⁶⁷ The word museum is instantaneously associated with a sense of trust and has been accorded a powerful status in past and present cultures, defining what is good or bad through the institution's selection process.⁶⁸ For this reason, the designation of an Instagram Museum as a 'museum', is a deliberate choice by most establishments, contributing to their acceptance and standing in society.⁶⁹

As this affects the status of the institution, it appears to also influence the visitors' framing of the space. Both Amy and Clara made it clear that to them the MoIC was a form of traditional art museum, featuring an educational element and captivating artworks, while Bianca, on the other hand, mentioned the differing tolerance towards photographs in the two types of spaces as the main distinction between Instagram Museum and traditional museum. Viewers come looking for a more relaxed, leisurely experience – exchanging the traditional museum for an Instagram Museum – which they deem just as valuable. The two types of institutions hereby seem to be equivalent for audiences, both providing the impression of a cultural activity.

Compared to the wider scope of a traditional museum, an Instagram Museum's target audience is synonymous with Instagram's user demographic. Recent statistics show that the largest group of the platform's users are between the ages of 18 to 34, a mix of Gen Zs and Millennials, showcasing a clear overlap also with the interview participants' ages.⁷⁰ Having a concrete age span to focus on allows Instagram Museums to run targeted advertisements on social media and adapt their image and approaches to the current preferences of the group. As Instagram has changed from a chronological to an algorithmic feed, it is crucial for accounts to not only post often, but maximize

⁶⁷ Bunn, Maryellis, "Everything You Think You Know About the Museum of Ice Cream Is Wrong: Interview With CEO," Interview by Sissi Cao, October 9, 2019, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://observer.com/2019/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn-funding-interview/>.

⁶⁸ Levine, Adam, *The Future of the Museum*, Interview by Andras Szántó, 295.

⁶⁹ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 21.

⁷⁰ Statista, "Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of January 2021, by age group," 2021, Accessed: 19 April 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/>.

engagement with followers in order to appear at the top of their page.⁷¹ Presently, the reputation of a strong social media page is one of the most important factors in determining the success of a brand or organization.⁷² Staying at the top of Instagram feeds offers an institution the opportunity of being the first option users encounter, thus becoming their number one choice for a leisurely activity.⁷³ Having a clear target audience and brand image helps Instagram Museums stay relevant and active on social media, hereby preserving their popularity and prosperity. Moreover, as exemplified even further by the interviews, spaces such as the MoIC remain active beyond their own page, through their visitors' posts. While Amy, Bianca and Clara were familiar with the MoIC's page, they became actively interested in visiting it by seeing other users' photographs in the installations. Featuring a space that has many photo opportunities and is appreciated by online communities gives Instagram Museums the upper hand in terms of social media exposure.

Alongside a strong virtual presence, the MoIC already offers something palpable through its fundamental concept and name. The promise of ice cream, or more generally of food, is an attractive factor for prospective visitors, while also doubling as a clever marketing scheme.⁷⁴ Unlike most traditional museums, as defined by ICOM, Instagram Museums are for-profit establishments. They capitalize from large brand collaborations that want to be a part of the phenomenon by advertising their logos or even creating entire rooms featuring selected products. The MoIC has displayed a swing, Tinder themed room (Fig. 5) and has been sponsored by many brands including Dove and Fox.⁷⁵ More recently however, spaces such as the MoIC do not truly necessitate outside sponsorships anymore, as they are more than self-sufficient. For its final pop-up exhibition in San Francisco, the MoIC sold out more than 30'000 tickets priced at \$38 in the first 90

⁷¹ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 18.

⁷² Manuel Charr, "What we can learn from Pop-Up Museums? Best practice and ideas from Instagram friendly experiences," *Museum Next*, 2019, Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-we-can-learn-from-pop-up-museums-best-practice-and-ideas-from-instagram-friendly-experiences/>.

⁷³ Carly Straughan, "Is Instagram Culture a Positive Influence for Museums?" *Museum Next*, 2019, Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/is-instagram-culture-a-positive-influence-for-museums/>.

⁷⁴ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 161.

⁷⁵ Arielle Pardes, "Selfie Factories: The Rise of the Made-for-Instagram Museum," *Condé Nast*, 2017, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/selfie-factories-instagram-museum/>.

minutes.⁷⁶ Currently Bunn's company Figure8, that comprises the Museums of Ice Cream, is valued at \$200M.⁷⁷ In order to maintain such revenues and accommodate the large numbers of visitors, the MoIC allows for limited 45 minute visits and has trademarked every installation featured in the space.⁷⁸ While they function under the name of a museum, Instagram Museums prioritise profit in their practices and branding, which gives them their desired level of independence.

Museum-like Instagram Museum: Museum Voorlinden

At this stage it is necessary to clarify how the Museum Voorlinden and similar museal institutions fit into the scope of this research more concretely. While the museum and its workers are perhaps more likely to describe the Voorlinden as a traditional art museum rather than a gallery-like Instagram Museum such as the MoIC, it features some key differences to more conservative museological establishments. These encompass its location, the approach the museum invites towards the artworks and the manner in which the museum has branded itself. The interviewees of the Voorlinden all seemed to agree that through such elements, the museum is setting itself apart from traditional institutions. The high level of interactivity and the unique location were the most crucial factors that contributed to the appreciation and elevation of the museum in the eyes of the visitors, giving them more space and freedom to explore. In terms of ICOM's museum definition the Voorlinden also differentiates itself through its exhibitions, privatised financial standing and in more recent years also its welcoming of social media interaction. These are features that are becoming more common in traditional art museums, however, are as of yet not fully accepted, thereby encouraging more research in the field.

The Museum Voorlinden located in Wassenaar, the Netherlands, is one of the country's leading attractions for art enthusiasts. On permanent display they feature

⁷⁶ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 160.

⁷⁷ OVC, "Museum of Ice Cream Founders Launch Figure8 with Series A to Transform How Millennials and Gen-Z Connect With Spaces and Each Other," 2019, Accessed: 19 April 2021, <https://www.ocvpartners.com/news-item/museum-of-ice-cream-founders-launch-figure8-with-series-a-to-transform-how-millennials-and-gen-z-connect-with-spaces-and-each-other/>.

⁷⁸ Anna Wiener, "The Millennial Walt Disney," *New York Magazine*, 2017, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn.html>.

famous large scale artworks, such as *Swimming Pool* by Leandro Erlich (Fig. 6) and *Open Ended* by Richard Serra (Fig. 7).⁷⁹ Alongside these immersive installations, the museum houses multiple temporary exhibitions every year. By collaborating with private collectors and other museological institutions, the Voorlinden seems to constantly have an impressive selection of contemporary artworks. These captivating temporary exhibitions keep a sense of novelty of the institution and attract different audiences through their large scope and recognizable artists. The fear of missing out on a perhaps once in a lifetime exhibition, mobilizes visitors and suggests a larger exposure through the public's interest and recommendations.⁸⁰ Correspondingly, the second interviewee Betty, was especially excited about the Louise Bourgeois exhibition on her last visit at the Voorlinden, not wanting to miss such an extensive display. Reminiscent of the MoIC's pop-up concept, the Voorlinden preserves a sense of exclusivity through its constant changes, simultaneously distancing itself from the accepted ICOM museum definition. Even though no visitor would contest the status of the Voorlinden as a museum, its focus on also displaying many short-term exhibits, already puts some space between them and other more conservative museal institutions. The interviews showcased this shift distinctly, as the visitors were more likely to differentiate between the Voorlinden and traditional institutions in terms of the more relaxed approach towards the audience and objects, some even saying that it is a "totally different experience."

The object selection made by an acknowledged museum has an important social role, as this not only determines what people should consider tasteful, 'good' or indeed more generally art, but rather also has an impact on the identities and standings of a given group.⁸¹ The selection of specific objects maintains a certain narrative determined by the museum, opening the space for carefully chosen interactions and experiences. These histories, memories and narratives based on the displayed objects, hereby initiate a set of discussions and thoughts that can end up shaping the manner in which society perceives specific subjects or groups.⁸² This power of the institutions gives museums an

⁷⁹ Museum Voorlinden, "Highlights", Accessed: 19 April 2021, <https://www.voorlinden.nl/exhibition/highlights/?lang=en>.

⁸⁰ Stockham, "There's a Museum for That?" 42.

⁸¹ De Duve, *Aesthetics at Large*, 45.

⁸² Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, 59.

elevated standing in society, allowing them to function based on a relationship of trust with their audience.⁸³ Hinging on this cultural service that they offer, museums are also awarded financial benefits allowing them to function similarly to non-profit foundations in terms of taxes and donations.⁸⁴ In order to maintain their status, however, museums have to continuously prove that they are more than just entertaining, contributing to society with their knowledge and content. Currently problematic for the museum is the growing opinion that they have become outdated and have remained too strict in an ever-changing and increasingly more open minded environment, not managing to adapt quickly enough to the demands of its audiences. Spaces such as the Museum Voorlinden are attempting to keep up with such societal shifts, by stepping out of the framework of the ultra-traditional museum, and according to participants' opinions, they are indeed succeeding. Each of the interviewed women stated that the experience they had in the Voorlinden was uniquely interactive, making them more likely to return and also to choose it over a more traditional space.

As observed in the previous analysis of gallery-like Instagram Museums, one of the fastest rising demands is for uncommon and immersive experiences. This is something that can become a hurdle for more traditional institutions as it demands considerable changes in terms of display style and assisting tools. Museum Voorlinden and other contemporary museums have an advantage in this area as current artworks themselves have become increasingly interactive. Simply through the selection of certain installations the museum can already gain a much more interactive feel. However, there are other measures that museum-like Instagram Museums have taken in order to achieve higher engagement, beyond relying on the artists. The Voorlinden allocates a large space to each of its artworks, giving visitors the chance to truly interact with the art piece from all angles and making photographing the artworks, or yourself in front of it, much more convenient. Anne and Carmen (participants 1 & 3) considered the spacious rooms to be one of the Voorlinden's biggest assets. By allowing them to move freely, the two visitors had an overall more relaxing experience than in a different type of museum, allowing them

⁸³ Philip Kennicott, "Is it a museum or not? The question is worth asking," Washington Post, 2018, Accessed: 15 March 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/is-it-a-museum-or-not-the-question-is-worth-asking/2018/10/12/54eded68-c5c1-11e8-9b1c-a90f1daae309_story.html.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

to unwind while also maximizing the interaction to their desired extent and turning the visit into an individually adaptable experience. This led to them being more open to taking pictures within the installations, as encouraged by the museum, feeling less pressured by a strict layout or positioning of themselves in the rooms. Through the setting it provides and hereby the photographic engagement it nourishes, the Voorlinden profits from larger online exposure. Furthermore, as both Anne and Carmen as well as Ellen pointed out, by being located in a natural environment, the museum provides a break from the outside world, inviting its visitors to truly immerse themselves in the space of the museum and of each installation. These are largely advantages of the construction of new museum buildings specifically for this use, rather than redesigning existing historical buildings as most traditional museums have done.

Compared to the majority of museums which are public and often part of larger museal organizations, the Museum Voorlinden does not depend on external donations as it is a private institution.⁸⁵ This aspect allows the establishment far more freedom in terms of its exhibition topics, selection of objects, partnerships and even display and research methods. Not depending on funding, means that the decisions concerning the museum can take place directly within the institution, without demanding consideration of external factors. This liberty is furthermore mirrored by the active role that they give to their visitors throughout the exhibitions, stating on their website that: “The Highlights that are on display in museum Voorlinden cannot be described – one must undergo them.”⁸⁶ Such an immersive approach to the collection as well as welcoming phone photography and keeping an active Instagram profile, has led to a positive image of the museum online. Through its large social media following, the Voorlinden’s artworks have become reposted many times over, and have been established as aesthetically pleasing settings in online communities. This has also allowed them to approach the artworks they display from a more aesthetic angle, as opposed to more traditional museums’ obligation to take into account a variety of social as well as historical issues, as Diana also pointed out in her interview. Through its financial stability and interactive opportunities that attract large

⁸⁵ Museum Voorlinden, “Partners and benefactors,” Accessed: 19 April 2021, <https://www.voorlinden.nl/museum/benefactors-and-partners/?lang=en>.

⁸⁶ Museum Voorlinden, “Highlights”, Accessed: 19 April 2021, <https://www.voorlinden.nl/exhibition/highlights/?lang=en>.

numbers of visitors, the Voorlinden has managed to maintain a much higher amount of freedom than most traditional institutions.

Both the MoIC and the Museum Voorlinden have proven to be successful establishments in the current socio-cultural context. They attract large numbers of visitors and have managed to maintain a strong online presence, keeping them in the network of Instagram trends. Even though they each have a different status for the general public, as the Voorlinden is considered an art museum at its core while the MoIC is rather an experience, they both showcase a new approach to museal practices. The manner in which they are altering institutions' methods in regard to their visitors' role within the space and the adaptability of it to their needs, is precisely in line with the current societal demands. Their focus on Instagram approved aesthetic experiences and entertaining interactivity with the installations is currently placing them at the top of audiences' preferred leisurely activities.

Chapter 2: Art and Aesthetic Experience

Contemporary Installation Art

The Voorlinden and the MoIC both feature immersive installation-based experiences which set them apart from more traditional art spaces. It is therefore essential to lead the discussion towards the effects and importance of art experiences taking place in museums by considering what exactly contemporary installation art is and how it affects the position of the visitor. With the introduction of large scale, immersive installations, the function of art changed, opening up possibilities for new approaches and sensations. Installation art centers on the viewer and is structured in order to create a distinct, often powerful experience.⁸⁷ It invites a certain level of interaction, giving the option of a more direct engagement with the socio-cultural themes it portrays.⁸⁸ Psychology researchers Matthew Pelowski et al. observed a close connection between installation art and emotional responses, stating: “Installations require the visitor’s consideration of the juxtaposition of space and artwork elements, and often their reflection on emotions, bodily sensations, as well as on ambiguity or confusion in such responses.”⁸⁹ Artworks do not need to be descriptive in order for them to transmit a specific feeling, rather they benefit from ‘metaphorical exemplification’, meaning that they can convey emotions or moods outside of a representational framework.⁹⁰ This is even more apparent when observing installation art, as the spatial and multisensorial dimensions of such artworks makes them more easily accessible and decodable by an audience.

Contemporary installation art is considered to have a strong element of theatricality generated through its immersive character.⁹¹ It demands an openness to participation and of becoming temporarily a part of the space of the work of art. Hereby, it is through the viewers that come to actively engage with the artwork that the installations can be ‘completed’, accomplishing its full potential and reaching its intended state.⁹² This factor

⁸⁷ Caldarola, “On Experiencing Installation Art,” 340.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 339.

⁸⁹ Pelowski et al., “Capturing Aesthetic Experiences,” 2.

⁹⁰ Winner, *How Art Works*, 17.

⁹¹ Sedgwick, Katrina, *The Future of the Museum*, Interview by Andras Szántó, 271; Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum*, 17.

⁹² Suess, “Instagram and Art Gallery Visitors,” 109; Pelowski et al., “Capturing Aesthetic Experiences,” 3.

is shifting the manner in which relationships between objects or artworks and visitors are perceived, often removing or silencing the museum's influence, additionally encouraging new approaches to organic or digital interactions. Scenographer Kris Rutten writes about these developments, arguing that the current focus on participation is intertwining art with digital culture while also launching new interpretations of an artwork's space and the interactions happening within it.⁹³ The growing preference for installation art is greatly influencing the museum landscape, raising questions about the display methods of the institutions and forcing them to reconsider their position and impact of the experiences of their audiences. By taking these shifts in the art world into account, Museum Voorlinden is adapting quickly to the demands of installation pieces and the growing attraction to participatory artworks. While the MoIC also features large scale installations, there is an ongoing debate about the status of the objects, as they stand between art and non-art, thereby inviting a different perspective on the analysis of current art developments.

Aesthetics and Aesthetic Experience

The field of aesthetics has been approached in a variety of manners by a wide selection of scholars, having been mainly attached to philosophical theories. In the current context, a theoretical framework of aesthetics assists in clarifying the importance of art experience in current society and showcases the source of Instagram's success as a platform producing visually beautiful content. As it is not part of this research's scope to explore a variety of interpretation of the field of aesthetics, but rather give a general understanding of the role of this area and aesthetic experience in art, this selection has been narrowed down to art critic Thierry De Duve's reinterpretation of Kant's writings on the aesthetic and its application to art. In his book *Aesthetics at Large*, De Duve argues that the appreciation of a specific thing is based on the feeling that it evokes, stating that such properties become available for any person through a subjective feeling.⁹⁴ Beauty is an individual standard, a judgement which is pleasantly pondered on by the viewer and which

⁹³ Rutten, "Participation, Art and Digital Culture," 2.

⁹⁴ De Duve, *Aesthetics at Large*, 17.

feels instinctual or even objective, but is ultimately an interpretation.⁹⁵ While they are personal, there is always a certain 'you' towards which aesthetic judgements or preferences are formulated, hereby "imply[ing] a universal address."⁹⁶ However, the crucial attribute of aesthetic judgement is that it does not influence the qualities of the object nor the manner in which it is perceived by its observers, rather its aim is its impact upon the agreement or disagreement within the group.⁹⁷ Høffding, Rung and Roald explain this in terms of subjectivity versus objectivity, stating that: "An aesthetic experience concerns a subjective, or intersubjective, process and not an objective property, or better yet, it is a relation of meaning encompassing both subject and object."⁹⁸ In other words, the perception of aesthetic preference is dependent on a given object, yet it has no power upon it, only affecting the social relations of the people involved. In relation to these observations, De Duve introduces the concept of *sensus communis*, a sharable sentiment, arguing for its central role in aesthetics: "The faculty of taste [...] is important inasmuch as it testifies to a universally shared faculty of agreeing, which Kant calls *sensus communis*."⁹⁹ This does not mean that everyone has to agree in some way or another, but rather that each person's point of view or individual aesthetic preference can be shared by the rest.¹⁰⁰

Now that we have settled a basic understanding on how aesthetic judgements work, the question remains what really is the value of such experiences for art? In order to broaden the applicability of aesthetic preference, De Duve explains how exactly an object can even be recognized as a work of art, arguing that it is largely dependent on aesthetic judgements.¹⁰¹ Our preferences carry a lot of weight in relation to art, as they can signal taste, knowledge and status, or on the contrary they can cause embarrassment.¹⁰² This is the core of the belief that all artworks ever made have something in common, a certain characteristic which makes them art.¹⁰³ However, Leslie

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Høffding, Rung and Roald, "Participation and Receptivity," 72.

⁹⁹ De Duve, *Aesthetics at Large*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰¹ De Duve, *Aesthetics at Large*, 142.

¹⁰² Ibid., 21.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 46.

Bedford, former head of exhibition research at the Boston Children's Museum, argues by recalling philosopher John Dewey's writings, that a work of art is only art once it interacts with a viewer, so as soon as somebody upon observing it has a specific experience and hereby categorizes it as art.¹⁰⁴ Returning to De Duve, the context of experiencing art determines whether it is categorized this way, being primarily based on each person's individual, mental art collection. He explains this further by writing:

“We make these judgments according to these expectations, which means that when we are presented with a candidate for art, we compare this object spontaneously, even unconsciously, with works of art we already know. More precisely, we compare our subjective experience of the object we are looking at with the memory of a large number of similar experiences we have had in the past of works of art we have learned to appreciate.”¹⁰⁵

Each person defines what art is based on personal experience and gathers external opinions which they deem as valuable.¹⁰⁶ Cultural institutions and experts in the art industry are some of the most trusted factors that regulate 'artness', through the consideration that they have been exposed to and have sorted through larger collections of good, bad and even non-art.¹⁰⁷ This personal subjective collection that is created within each human being remains the standard against which new objects are compared, in order to evaluate their status. Ultimately, it is this collection that determines whether or not a viewer is open towards an aesthetic experience when observing a specific artwork. If upon first glance, the work of art fails to impose itself as art, then the potential of a powerful artistic aesthetic experience is diminished. Viewers are less likely to consider an aesthetic experience if what they are looking at is not considered art by them. As artworks most often appear in determined settings, such as galleries or museums, in which a visitor is likely to enter with the expectation of seeing art, the openness towards aesthetic experiences and hereby the actual provoking of such an experience is more probable.

¹⁰⁴ Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, 79.

¹⁰⁵ De Duve, *Aesthetics at Large*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 45, 47.

This means that an aesthetic art experience is not only dependent on the willingness of the person to have it, but also by factors such as location or acc.

Art vs. Non-art

The approaches to determining what art is differ in respect to the theories used, as for example a scientific procedure would observe what people consider to be art, unlike a philosophical one which would take a variety of factors into consideration, looking more at the core of art.¹⁰⁸ According to De Duve, 'artness' is determined through institutions which in turn create a collective and ultimately a personal opinion based on the collection or impression of certain objects that one has been exposed to. However, a crucial concern is that perhaps not just anything can or should be a work of art, even if somebody with an appreciated status says it is. Moreover, while the experience of an institution or critic is important, it does not have to be definitive, as De Duve states: "Anyone and everyone is a legitimate judge of art, and as a result anything and everything is potentially art *in principle*."¹⁰⁹ Any object has the potential of becoming recognized as art even though most are not, as society still looks towards institutions of power for confirmation. This is precisely why the general acceptance of Instagram Museums as novel alternatives to accepted cultural institutions carries a lot of weight in the current social landscape. By being allocated such a status, the objects that Instagram Museums put on display have the potential of becoming integral to contemporary artistic practices, shifting trends in and the development of art. While the objects featured in the Voorlinden and the MoIC are arguably not of the same caliber, through the status of the institution housing them could begin altering the manner in which they are being perceived, as hinted upon by the interviewees. The visitors of the MoIC considered the installation to be a version of art, partly as they did not know how else to categorize them, with Clara even saying that: "It's on the borderline between art and commercial entertainment."

¹⁰⁸ Winner, *How Art Works*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ De Duve, *Aesthetics at Large*, 49.

On the other hand, one of the most mentioned aspects determining whether an object is a work of art is that of intention.¹¹⁰ MoIC visitor Amy even used this as her primary argument for considering the installations as artworks, as in her own words: “[there] was someone who created this look, the colors and how it should be presented to the customers.” An artist has to have thought at some point, whether from the start or upon the completion of a piece, that what he has made is art. This innate quality of intentionality connects further on with the idea of essence or aura. In addition to an object’s physical and visual appearance, it can carry within it something that makes it special. This can be a certain feeling, a perceived relationship to the artist or even what the artwork has been exposed to.¹¹¹ This is what Winner calls essence and what she equates with Walther Benjamin's concept of aura. Essence or aura is what gives an (art) object its uniqueness, being maintained only within the original artwork.¹¹² Benjamin considers that through technological advancements and hereby the rise of reproducibility, the aura of an object is destroyed, making artists turn toward the task of simulating this essence which cannot be replaced.¹¹³ While this Benjaminian aura offers the option of being discussed in much more detail, for the research at hand it is important to consider that an extensive reinterpretation and actualization of his theories would be necessary, in order for them to be truly and accurately applicable to the age and force of artistic reproducibility through social media. The current importance of aura for this thesis lies in its effect on aesthetic experience. The determination of an artwork being art and hereby being able to transmit an aesthetic experience, is influenced by the essence of an artwork. This aura can be a crucial factor in including an artwork in a physical or mental collection of art, as it invites a specific relationship between viewer and object from the start.

This debate on the art status of objects brings us back to the discussion on the acceptance of Instagram Museums as institutions. Nobody truly questions whether the installations of the Voorlinden should be allowed to be called art, as it is clear through the prominence of the institution and the rank of the artists that they belong to this category, however, the MoIC’s pieces are in a more precarious position. While Amy, Bianca and

¹¹⁰ Winner, *How Art Works*, 23.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹² Halpern and Humphreys, “Iphoneography as an Emergent Artwork,” 65.

¹¹³ Halpern and Humphreys, “Iphoneography as an Emergent Artwork,” 65; Winner, *How Art Works*, 139.

Clara stated that the objects on display should be considered art, according to them, this was mainly a consequence of a lack of a better word. The categorization of the installations as art and of the MoIC as a museum comes from the absence of a more adequate classification. While they do feature artistic elements, the objects do not fully manifest the conditions of art; there is no defined artist, no clear intention and each of the objects can and is reproduced many times over. As a consequence of this confusion, it becomes questionable to what extent an aesthetic experience can materialize, as it has been previously argued that this would require an object to be viewed as an artwork in the first place. However, according to the accounts of the participants a profound experience did occur in both the MoIC and the Voorlinden disputing the demand for artistically valuable works in order for an aesthetic art experience to unfold. It hereby becomes a purely academic concern to redefine the terms encompassing Instagram Museums and their installations, as in practice their experiential influence is apparent.

Rupture and the Transitional Space

Having discussed aesthetic experience and its value, I would like to turn towards a different facet, namely a psychoanalytic take on art experience. The interdisciplinary field of art and psychoanalysis currently offers many different applications, among which a novel approach to art experience that can be found through the theories of Donald W. Winnicott on the 'transitional space'. In order to discuss this topic, however, it is necessary to start by introducing the concept of rupture through art historian Délia Vékony's 2017 doctoral dissertation "Ground Zero. The transitional space of contemporary art." Vékony introduces 'rupture' as being the trigger for a profound art experience, defining it as: "a 'tear' inflicted in the social or individual 'body' of the self; there is a shattering of frames of reference and taken-for-granted structures."¹¹⁴ Rupture cuts through and creates a distance to the real external world, opening up a gateway to a space where the viewer can rethink their approach to understanding the world.¹¹⁵ It is a condition for entering the next phase of art experience, however it is not made available through all artworks. This

¹¹⁴ Vékony, "Ground Zero," 123.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 122.

process demands a type of shock transmitted through the tension found in the object, leading to a state of ambiguity and making the viewer question how to place the artwork within the accepted frames of knowledge.¹¹⁶ Upon failing to contextualize the artwork or elements of it, a rift can occur, transporting the audience into the transitional space. For Vékony, rupture is a key element in art experience, necessitating artworks that can surpass their representational characteristics and which are profoundly touching, often reaching this status by being intellectually demanding, high art pieces. The selection of artworks that have the force to open up the transitional space is hereby supported by an elitist mentality, mirroring the strict inclusion and exclusion process of museums, ultimately defining what is 'good' art.

Donald W. Winnicott remains one of the most influential psychoanalysts to date, having contributed largely to the field of child development and play. He is also celebrated for his interdisciplinary approaches, which did not limit him to applying his theories only in his immediate field. While not depending directly on an aesthetic factor, Winnicott argues that art experiences, similarly to religious ones, are beneficial to the viewer, explaining that they are only possible through accessing the so-called transitional space.¹¹⁷ This phenomenon is an important element in the development of children, being first encountered in four to twelve months old babies.¹¹⁸ Vékony summarizes the transitional space as: "the state in which the child experiences both realities: the self as an independent subject and the self as merged together with its surroundings."¹¹⁹ In other words, during this period the child begins realizing that an object that they have formed a strong attachment to, such as a blanket or a soft toy, named the transitional object, is not actually a part of them.¹²⁰ Winnicott depicts the transitional object as being: "a symbol of the union of the baby and the mother (or part of the mother)."¹²¹ This transitional object is not yet fully understood as external, yet it is becoming increasingly more clear to the child that it is also not an internal or mental creation that is a part of them, launching the first

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 18.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹¹⁹ Vékony, "Ground Zero," 153.

¹²⁰ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 6.

¹²¹ Ibid., 130.

experiences of play between baby and object.¹²² The state which allows for this blurring of boundaries between internal and external, subjective and objective is called the transitional space.¹²³ Within this space the child can perform acts of reality testing, as it is located in between the outer and inner world, carrying elements of both and allowing the baby to play between creativity and objectivity, resulting finally in a separation from the transitional object and ultimately the realization that the mother and the self are not the same entity.¹²⁴

Even though this first appears at an early age, Winnicott argues that this transitional space remains accessible even to adults throughout their whole lives through experiences of play, art, religion or even psychotherapy.¹²⁵ He describes the potential of the transitional space as an area of experience that combines elements of the inner and outer worlds, functioning as a space of rest from the daily task of keeping these realities separate and interconnected.¹²⁶ It can be understood that the transitional space is necessary to adult life as it offers a potential break and reevaluation of one's surroundings in the form of an intermediate space of experience. Winnicott goes on to explain that: "the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.)"¹²⁷ The transitional space hereby becomes an opportunity to have cultural experiences which do not or cannot be strictly categorized in the inner or outer world and that are essential to maintaining enjoyment and balance in everyday life. Through this phase it becomes possible to access a creative and imaginative side of the visitor as it demands a break from logic and rationality, in order for the experience to take place. For example the viewer has to observe a painting as a unit and as a story, looking beyond the clear logical fact that what they are seeing is simply pigment on wood or canvas. If the spell of the object is disturbed and the viewer falls into an analytical examination, the transitional space collapses. Additionally, as exemplified through the link to the transitional object, the

¹²² Ibid., 13, 130.

¹²³ Ibid., 4.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 3; 15; 19-20.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 18.

meaning of and attachment to an item can shift and along with it, through the process of reality-testing, a person's comprehension of the surrounding world can change. Returning to Vékony's application of Winnicott's theories, she argues that as rupture destabilizes the social framework of the viewer, they can enter the transitional space in which the tensions found in the artwork that could not be processed, now do not have to be ordered in a strict system of understanding and knowledge. This means that through the artwork's opening of the transitional space, the viewers can 're-test' their reality, without the external pressures of the real world. Such art experiences can hereby be profoundly moving and can even allow a viewer to redefine their system of beliefs. Taking this into consideration, art (experience) does not only provide benefits in terms of enjoyment, but also has an important impact on its audience and its socio-cultural environment.

Instagram's Effect on Museum Experience

a. Photographing Motivation

Experience and museum photography is the foundation of the popularity of Instagram Museums, as the approaches they have adopted focus on making their spaces as photogenic as possible, while also prioritizing the visitors within the installations. Cameras and photographs have been used as artistic or aesthetic instruments, but also as devices for memory collection, making them deeply linked with the desire to showcase what one has been a part of, in terms of the locations seen and activities undergone.¹²⁸ As in the past decade there has been a large increase in pictures captured, the variety of moments and experiences snapped has widened.¹²⁹ This factor coincided with the rise of iPhone photography and the surge in popularity of Instagram, hereby also being linked to the growing appetite for sharing the pictures taken. As a primarily photographic social media platform, Instagram has focused on the influence of the visual in structuring the way users interact with each other, creating communities of style and simultaneously functioning as a memory bank.¹³⁰ Having been re-designed back in 2015 to fit the more aesthetic and

¹²⁸ Lee, "Digital Cameras," 271.

¹²⁹ Barasch, Zauberman and Diehl, "How Taking Photos Increases," 119.

¹³⁰ Budge, "Objects in Focus," 68.

simple use that users were craving, Instagram is now one of the preferred ways of sharing (visual) experiences, featuring over 50 billion posts overall.¹³¹

Photography has maintained a strong commemorative function since its invention two centuries ago. What is captured hereby shows what is important to a certain person and mirrors the focus of a society.¹³² Memory is one of the most defining factors of individual and collective identities, thus making the process of external memory preservation through photography bear a lot of weight for people and communities all around the world.¹³³ Additionally to the importance it carries in terms of its meaning producing effect, a photograph, similarly to a story, invites a desire to share with others.¹³⁴ Pictures are hereby often taken with both goals in mind; to be remembered and distributed. When observed in the context of capturing an exhibition or museum, photography and its sharing has the possibility of accessing a specific memory and opening up a discussion, thereby prolonging or reviving the experience had in the space.¹³⁵ A study conducted by Alixandra Barasch et al. even showed that the overall museum experience was remembered better by those who chose to take pictures than those who did not.¹³⁶ This benefit of photography for memory is mirrored in the way social media platforms are currently being used.¹³⁷ Users share experiences such as travels, birthdays or other unique activities, triggering the creation of commemorative communities and connections.¹³⁸ As increasingly more people are using Instagram as a memory bank, it is also important to note that they do not share everything, but rather that only very few memories or pictures make it onto somebody's feed.¹³⁹ Only the very best memories that have an aesthetic character are featured, hereby creating often unrealistic expectations of a given experience.¹⁴⁰ Even though the Instagram Museum interview participants were not asked about the role of memory in their exhibition experiences, the

¹³¹ Budge, "Objects in Focus," 72; Omnicore, "Instagram by Numbers," 2021, Accessed: 26 April, 2021. <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics/>.

¹³² Crang and Cook, *Doing Ethnographies*, 10; Barasch et al., "Photographic Memory," 1056.

¹³³ Crang and Cook, *Doing Ethnographies*, 10; Barasch et al., "Photographic Memory," 1062.

¹³⁴ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 41.

¹³⁵ Suess, "Instagram and Art Gallery Visitors," 117.

¹³⁶ Barasch et al., "Photographic Memory," 1065.

¹³⁷ Serafinelli, "Network Remembrance," 2.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

majority mentioned it as a strong photographing motivation. Most interviewees connected the desire to photograph and to share the images online with the fact that they had enjoyed the experience thoroughly. Their pictures remain for them important tokens of memory of a fun day which is externally observed by a follower as an experience that they themselves could replicate and enjoy.

The strict selection of what ends up being posted on a user's Instagram feed is an important part of the Instagram experience, as each picture defines the aesthetic of the person. Leaver, Highfield and Abidin explain that these posts are carefully curated by showcasing a chosen facet of the experience as "aesthetic appeal is key to getting their audience to engage."¹⁴¹ With this aesthetic factor in mind, museum researcher Kylie Budge has analyzed the interaction between exhibition attendees, displayed objects and Instagram through a study on Instagram posts of a museum exhibit, noting that the platform has become central even to cultural institutions.¹⁴² By going through hundreds of pictures, Budge concluded that the aesthetic nature of the objects on display was critical to the visitors, observing that the focus of the visit was directly aimed at the objects exhibited and how their material qualities appeared on a screen.¹⁴³ It is hereby not only the beauty of a space that is important, but also the way it appears on a screen. Adam Suess argues that "their post [becomes] an extension of their aesthetic experience," meaning that the process of sharing online is a crucial element of the museum visit for Instagram users.¹⁴⁴ The posting itself can be understood as the finalization of the experience, having the unique characteristic of offering viewers the option to return and potentially relive it, similarly to a memory. This process reframes the experience by giving it new facets such as language through the caption or social relationships through the interactions with other followers, having moved it to a technological dimension in which the experience can be prolonged.¹⁴⁵

Correspondingly, most interview participants were influenced to photograph the installations based on their exceptional aesthetic qualities. In the MoIC this was focused

¹⁴¹ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 69.

¹⁴² Budge, "Objects in Focus," 72.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80, 81.

¹⁴⁴ Suess, "Instagram and Art Gallery Visitors," 109.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

on the many colors used in the installations, while for the Voorlinden there was more attention given to how the participant contributed to the space, for example through the clothes that mirrored the artwork (Fig. 8). This points to the fact that the MoIC is appreciated mainly for the space's aesthetic qualities and the manner in which they appear in the photograph, while the audience of the Voorlinden contemplated their influence on and connection to the installations as they were in the space. It could be suggested that the MoIC is photographed primarily for external and virtual appreciation, while the pictures taken in the Voorlinden show a more conscious presence of the visitor in the space. They all ultimately posted the pictures in order to remember the moment and to share the experience that they had in the Instagram Museum. By attempting to bring the colors and the atmosphere of the museum to their feed, participants tried to reuse the aesthetic experience they had and showcase it as a personal, positive aesthetic judgement. For the visitors these aesthetic and commemorative motivations often overlapped and heightened each other, as both Amy and Diana described their desire to remember the moment because of the beauty of the place. This further led participants to want to share the experience within their community, whether this is one of aesthetic Instagram users and influencers or of art lovers.

These captures of moments, whether for aesthetic pleasure or as tokens of memory, have the primary motivation to be shared online, rather than be kept for oneself, which is a central development that was popularized by social media.¹⁴⁶ The constant consideration of how a follower will perceive the image on Instagram, affects the viewer's selection of subjects and their manners of photographing.¹⁴⁷ Alixandra Barasch et al. have devised multiple studies analyzing the effects of taking pictures with the intention of sharing it afterwards, discovering that this purpose actively decreases the enjoyment of the experience.¹⁴⁸ Taking place especially in environments where there is a large group judging the shared photograph, the lessening of pleasure is a direct cause of a rise in anxiety related to how one is perceived by the external audience.¹⁴⁹ This does not only affect the experience at hand, but also the desire to further recommend it to others as

¹⁴⁶ Budge, "Objects in Focus," 71.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁴⁸ Barasch et al., "How the Intention to Share," 1233.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

well as of repeating the activity themselves.¹⁵⁰ While it does seem that sharing overall negatively affects the enjoyment of an experience, digital media researcher Adam Suess argues that through the aim of sharing, participants paid more attention to their surroundings, being more aware of the experience that was unfolding.¹⁵¹ These factors were ultimately beneficial in terms of the takeaway from the experience, improving educational results, even if the pleasure of the activity decreased.¹⁵² After visiting the MoIC with the focus of providing new content for her followers, it was surprising to hear that Clara considered the experience educational. Even though it was not the aim of her visit, she reported that the interactivity with the space made her retain the information provided by the establishment through the fact posters. This suggests that the potential to pass on information of a space that actively engages its visitors with the exhibition could be more productive than that of a conservative and passive institution.

b. Effects on Art Experience

Instagram Museums are known to feature highly interactive settings that promote photography, hereby triggering engagement not just through the objects, but through the process of capturing a picture.¹⁵³ Even though a camera or a phone can be considered a distracting addition, according to Barasch, Zauberman and Diehl's study, photographing themselves and the rooms, heightens the overall enjoyment of the visitor's experience, as it forces the audience to be more attentive to the space and the activity, in order to find the best possible framing.¹⁵⁴ The main concern with the introduction of a screen in the museum experience, is to not let it overpower the real unfolding interaction with the objects, remaining only an extension of the engagement.¹⁵⁵ This clearly resonates with the participants' accounts as they considered the photographing and the use of their phone in the museum as a continuation of the experience, declaring to have remained focused on the actual space. Anne and Carmen particularly felt that the editing process

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Suess, "Instagram and Art Gallery Visitors," 117.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Barasch, Zauberman and Diehl, "How Taking Photos Increases," 120.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 134.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 135.

of the pictures was an extension of the memories and of the experience they had in the museum, allowing them to remain immersed in the museum beyond their physical visit. This instinctual appreciation of the editing and posting that they described can be linked back to Barasch, Zauberman and Diehl's study, as being a proven positive addition to a museum experience.¹⁵⁶

Posting on Instagram does not only offer a new dimension of interaction within the space, but rather also creates communities on the platform that are guided by the content shared. There are many communities on Instagram which are frequently centered on similar aesthetic styles, often grouped by hashtags or age range.¹⁵⁷ This social engagement with people adhering to a similar trend, is one of the main forms of communication on the platform and hereby the underlying motivation for most people's use of the application.¹⁵⁸ Returning to De Duve's Kantian interpretation of aesthetics, Instagram communities reflect the desire for sharing personal aesthetic judgement, hereby constituting a more palpable version of *sensus communis*. Everyone can showcase their taste and preferences online, adapting them to a specific Instagram style community that teaches them what is acceptable and what is not, in terms of experiences to have, places to see and the kind of people to interact with. Each user becomes part of a specific context, their posts not being truly individual, but rather standing in relation to others that have the same character.¹⁵⁹ The posts and ultimately the experiences users yearn for become part of a templatable community, at the cost of originality.¹⁶⁰ For example, after visiting the Voorlinden, Betty wanted to post her pictures in order to convince her friends and followers to go as well. She considered that the unique aesthetics of the images would be enough to motivate her online community to experience the museum as well. While well intentioned, such practices lead to the overuse of certain locations as picture backdrops in order for the visitors to attempt having the same desirable experience they had seen online.¹⁶¹ Instagram Museums have become the primary hot-spots for large Instagram communities, especially of younger

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 136.

¹⁵⁷ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 149.

¹⁵⁸ Miller, "Play Theory and Implications," 1; Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 40.

¹⁵⁹ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 44.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 72.

people, featuring the opportunity of reliving the same experience over and over again, mirroring the ones that attracted them in the first place. It is hereby crucial to users not only to show a unique and beautiful place, but to prove that they themselves were a part of it.¹⁶² The motivation to be active within the space is what saves the Instagram Museums from remaining passive photo studios, turning them into veritable experiences. Furthermore, the high demand for a certain space does not mean that the museums do not alter their look, as their changing elements are what keep them in vogue, rather it translates into the fact that the takeaway in terms of Instagrammable images remains of the same quality. There are some key aspects which are characteristic to the locations that need to be kept for the identity of the museum to remain intact, such as the Voorlinden's *Swimming Pool* or the MoIC's sprinkle pool (Fig. 9). Such distinctive elements support a close relationship to specific aesthetic communities and hereby protect the status and social value of a specific space. By preserving the same color scheme or style of installations, Instagram Museums that have already been popularized through social media can remain attractive spots for users, building on the same appreciated style.

As previously discussed, photographing an experience increases its enjoyment, while sharing it could be causing anxiety based on the expectation of external validation, however, it should also be considered that the inclusion of a phone in the museum space can influence certain aspects connected to the transitional space. The entrance into the transitional space is dependent on a break from the real world, having been previously defined as rupture, which appears through the force of an artwork. Upon the introduction of a device in the museum, the creation of a rift can become problematic. Smartphones are not limited to camera functions, rather they are one of our primary links to the world, as they make accessing emails, information and social media possible at any time. It can hereby be argued that by bringing them into the museum experience, an audience cannot truly feel separated from an outside reality. However, the virtual space of social media is not necessarily synonymous with the real world even though it is based on it. This online space brings on a sense of make-believe, including playful behaviours that do not need

¹⁶² Budge, "Objects in Focus," 81.

to abide by the same rules as the real and the strictly rational.¹⁶³ Social media provides an alternate version of reality that functions within a different set of rules, defined by the communities within it. As an alternative option maintaining elements of both the real and the mental or imaginary, virtual social networks could be understood as more flexible in allowing experiences to unfold. This is precisely what Instagram Museums strive to achieve, as regarding the topic of virtual versus real world within the MoIC, Maryellis Bunn states that: “One of our biggest opportunities as a brand is to allow people to fluidly live in both worlds.”¹⁶⁴ She considers Instagram Museums to be somewhere in between external society and the more personal and adaptable virtual space, defined mainly by social media platforms, allowing them to make room for a separation from every day, burdening life. The virtual space which is at play in these museums, can potentially be viewed as an extension of the transitional space, as it is also detached from the demand of an analytic mindset. This is not to say that they can be equaled, but rather that an experience that is made possible through the transitional space is not affected by and can even be prolonged into the virtual space of social media through the posting of pictures and interactions happening online. As they both function in relation to reality and imagination, but can fluidly move between them using elements of both, the transitional space and simultaneously the virtual can contribute to a profound art experience. This observation is supported by the findings of the interviews, as everyone who attended with the aim of having an aesthetic or art experience was not influenced by their phones and photography, as they could be in both spheres at once. All participants considered the addition of their phone in the museum space to be beneficial for the visit as it allowed them to interact with the exhibit and objects more closely. By focusing on achieving a postable picture, the visitors were hereby more involved with the displays and paid more attention to their surroundings. Since their experience was not just in the museum space but also simultaneously in the virtual one, through the pictures they took that intertwined the two spaces, they could revisit the moment at any time and with it bring their experience back to life. Most participants connected the photographs taken with the desire to

¹⁶³ Miller, “Play Theory and Implications,” 6.

¹⁶⁴ Bunn, Maryellis, “Everything You Think You Know About the Museum of Ice Cream Is Wrong: Interview With CEO,” Interview by Sissi Cao, October 9, 2019, Accessed: 15 March 2021, <https://observer.com/2019/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn-funding-interview/>.

preserve pleasant memories of the visit, with Diana particularly mentioning the need to immortalize such a unique moment. This is a particular phenomenon that is made possible with the 'looser' setting of Instagram Museums, normalizing the use of social media and hereby allowing for the virtual and transitional spaces to be connected.

Chapter 3: Play in the Art Museum

Playing is an intrinsic part of human life beginning as an activity through which babies develop and learn, and morphing into a crucial part of adult enjoyment and relationships. While it is something that we encounter every day, there is a scarce academic field focusing on adult play, especially when compared to the vast writings on children's play.¹⁶⁵ As a consequence, the largest amount of play theory focuses on the topics of education particularly at a young age, ignoring the fact that adults also need and enjoy to learn. It is seldom discussed that while play can be purposeful in terms of acquiring new knowledge, it can also be a purely enjoyable, unproductive activity. In the context of museal institutions, play is a considerably newer addition, as it has been mainly linked to participatory exhibits in children's museums, that are focused on making learning more accessible.¹⁶⁶ The focus of children's museums is to learn by doing, creating playful and interactive narratives with multisensorial engagement options that make it easier for children to remain concentrated on the topic of the exhibit.¹⁶⁷ To this extent Instagram Museum can be considered to be more closely related to and even the successors of the more liberated children's museums.

While traditional institutions have until recently avoided such a participatory approach to transmitting knowledge, education of the general public has been the primary goal of museums since their beginnings, and remains central to academic research in the museological field.¹⁶⁸ More recent developments in the art industry through the rise of competing establishments such as Instagram Museums, which are leaning towards more interactive artworks and calling for a shift in the position and role of the visitor in the museum, are demanding changes in the way these institutions share or impose their knowledge, hereby altering the manner in which they approach their audience and objects. In order to further discuss this changing museal landscape and the impact of Instagram Museums, it is first necessary to evaluate how the interaction within these spaces can be understood as acts of playing. In examining the role of such behaviours,

¹⁶⁵ Van Vleet and Feeney, "Play Behavior and Playfulness," 630.

¹⁶⁶ Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, 12.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

there are two main directions which need to be approached, namely a cultural analysis interpretation through the writings of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois and continuing along the previous chapter's framework, a psychoanalytic understanding through Donald W. Winnicott.

Play through Cultural Analysis

a. Definitions of Play by Huizinga and Caillois

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga is one of the most referential scholars in the field of play theory, being primarily known for his work *Homo Ludens* published in 1938. His book continues to be one of the pillars of current play study trajectories such as gamification and ludification. Huizinga stepped away from the psychological and biological comprehension of instinctual play, analyzing how cultural experience can be understood through the framework of playing. Inspired by his writing, philosopher Roger Caillois reevaluated and further developed Huizinga's theories on the cultural importance of play. His book *Man, Play and Games* (1961) takes a next step in the field of play by splitting it up into more concise categories and inquiring in more detail about game tools, such as masks. As it is a continuation of Huizinga's work, the upcoming discussion focuses primarily on Caillois' research, in order to then return to the application of play theory in cultural institutions.

One of the most essential elements of Huizinga's book is his formulation of a definition of play, which he describes as follows: "play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'."¹⁶⁹ Even though it was written almost a century ago, this quote introduces a number of important aspects that are still applicable to this topic today. Play cannot be forced, it is a choice of the player to engage in a given game, as he needs to consent to and follow the rules that are set.

¹⁶⁹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 47.

These rules are different from the ones of everyday life and as such playing is separate from societal constrictions and ultimately the player's daily habits. It is also an activity that is finite and dependent on a determined space, for example how chess is limited to a board with 64 squares. Finally and perhaps most crucially in relation to this research, playing has to be fun. It has to spark some sort of enjoyment and detachment from the ordinary world, bringing the player into the space of the game.

Caillois introduces a much more compact definition, which resonates for the largest part with his predecessor. He writes that: "Play is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, and governed by rules or make-believe."¹⁷⁰ The elements free, separate and rule-governed reflect Huizinga's instructions, however, the other three aspects set it apart. About uncertainty Caillois explains that in any game there is at the very least a small part which is up to the player's preference or imagination, making the course and result of play not fully determinable.¹⁷¹ Mirroring Huizinga's detachment from daily life, the unproductivity of play can be understood not as it cannot have any palpable result, but rather that it ceases to be play if it is practiced for economic gain.¹⁷² More explicitly, if a child makes a straw doll in the course of playing, the activity can remain playful even though it has a resulting good, however, if they were to start making them with the goal of giving them to their friends in return for other toys, an inherent productive desire would appear and the playing would stop. Lastly, Caillois focuses on the introduction of imagination in play, categorizing this as make-believe. This playing pretend is one of his primary areas of interest, as it best describes the separation of the game world from reality.¹⁷³

Both authors feel very strongly about the separation of play and work, considering that anyone who turns a game into a working, productive activity, ultimately puts a stop to playing. By financially benefiting from playing, the person blends too much of their daily, ordinary life with the realm of the games, thereby breaking the spell of it. Playing is meant to be a pause from the routine and responsibilities of the 'real' world, allowing the player

¹⁷⁰ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 9.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 10.

to relax and immerse themselves entirely in the game.¹⁷⁴ Caillois considers that play should be viewed as “an occasion for pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often money,” making it a completely voluntary and pleasurable experience.¹⁷⁵

What truly sets Caillois apart, are his four ways of categorizing play. He names these *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*, or competition, chance, simulation and vertigo respectively.¹⁷⁶ A large part of his writing is dedicated to exploring how these types of play can be combined and to what extent they overlap or influence each other. He mainly pairs *agôn* with *alea* and *mimicry* with *ilinx*, as the former are part of a more structured type of play, called *ludus*, while the latter are more free-flowing and spontaneous, encompassed by the term *paidia*.¹⁷⁷ Even by providing these clear separations, Caillois himself states that these determined categories and forms do not include all possibilities offered by play.¹⁷⁸

Playing is not just a free-time, entertaining activity, it influences our culture and society on a daily basis. Most games are not played alone, but rather feature a strong social component, whether through fellow players or an invested audience.¹⁷⁹ When playing, solitude is not beneficial, demanding various relationships to be built in the context of a game.¹⁸⁰ These exchanges in the space of playing have a strong impact on the way we relate to the world and the trajectory in which we choose to build our society. Caillois considers that games mirror our beliefs as well as morals and values, contributing to the development of our culture.¹⁸¹ What we consider fun and the manners in which we play, can define the rise or collapse of industries, such as gambling or competitive sports, showcasing our preferences and priorities. Huizinga argues even a step further stating that: “We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and as

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 27.

play, and never leaves it.”¹⁸² He does not separate culture from play, rather considering them forever intertwined and influencing each other. This is a critical factor in reevaluating the status of play in current society, as it should be understood as an essential element of adult life that has an impact on the manner in which we build relationships, the experiences we strive for and the ways in which we unwind. As such, Instagram Museums are a continuation of the desired playful activities that adults are increasingly seeking for their entertainment.

b. Mimesis

Mimesis is one of the widest categories of play, not only found in adults, but also encompassing most children's games. Caillois considers mimesis as a make-believe play, in which the players detach from reality through the role they adopt, putting aside their own personality.¹⁸³ The player becomes and mimics a specific character, making the audience regard him not as himself but as the figure.¹⁸⁴ This type of play uses a variety of props in order to fully cast its spell, such as costumes or masks.¹⁸⁵ These conceal the true identity of the player, thereby making the mimicry realistic, believable and often more fun, as they become part of the game. The mask protects the player and allows them to immerse themselves even further into the character, as they know that they cannot be recognized and thus can more easily separate from themselves.¹⁸⁶ However, while mimicry is a uniquely imaginative type of play, Caillois intervenes with a warning for the players, by talking of the corruption of mimicry. This does not happen through a spoilsport, but when the player refuses to step out of the character they played.¹⁸⁷ The simulation stops being imaginary and is confused with reality, as the player starts believing that their role is now a part of them.¹⁸⁸ The author calls this ‘alienation’ and views it as a direct consequence of not finalizing the game.¹⁸⁹ This is one of the results of not

¹⁸² Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 198.

¹⁸³ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 19.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 21; 23.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 130.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

limiting a playing to a specific time and place and allowing it to unfold indefinitely, thereby ultimately ceasing to play and entering into the realm of disorders that do not allow a player to continue a normal life.

While anyone can play in the style of mimicry, throughout history there have been many instances where playing pretend overstepped into the working sphere. From Ancient civilizations, the tradition of the theatre has been one that has entertained and educated the audience, remaining a pillar of the arts. While it still is spell-binding for the audience, the actors cannot be considered to be authentically playing on stage. Playing a role as a job and thus for financial gain, removes the pleasure and ultimately stops being play.¹⁹⁰ The mentality linked to working carries a certain monotony and tiredness as it is constantly repeated in similar ways.¹⁹¹ Caillois explains that work is something to take a break from through playing, as it is a draining and necessary activity, meaning that merging the two would become counterproductive and defeat the purpose of relaxation.¹⁹² A player that turns his play into work eventually will look for a different game in order to detach from their ordinary working life, further highlighting the influential position attributed to playfulness within our society.¹⁹³

Play through Psychoanalysis - Winnicott

Winnicott's research focused on developmental psychology and hereby on children's behaviours, encompassing how playing links to the transitional space and the learning methods of babies. However, the author clearly states that everything he writes about children's play also applies to adults, with the note that: "the matter is more difficult to describe when the patient's material appears mainly in terms of verbal communication," in comparison to children's more gestural expressions.¹⁹⁴ He considers playing to be an important aspect of psychotherapy that should be nourished and encouraged by the

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 54.

therapist, considering that therapy unfolds in the intertwining of the therapist's and the patient's play spaces.¹⁹⁵

Similarly to Huizinga and Caillois, Winnicott talks of play having a determined time and space, and being characterized by being an active engagement, as it cannot happen passively.¹⁹⁶ Playing is a largely beneficial activity for human beings, as it eases learning and hereby growth of children, while also maintaining the well-being of adults.¹⁹⁷ It is an endeavor that is essentially entertaining, satisfying and spontaneous, dependent on the creativity of the player, thus being an essential human act.¹⁹⁸ Even more importantly, as a social activity, playing promotes relationships and group building, functioning as a form of communication amongst players.¹⁹⁹ Consequently, this connection between participants can be constructive for pursuits such as the therapeutic process, easing exchanges between the people involved.²⁰⁰

In trying to locate this place where playing unfolds, Winnicott proposes “the potential space between the baby and the mother.”²⁰¹ The transitional space, as previously discussed, offers the possibility for experiences to manifest, blurring the boundaries of reality and imagination, letting them interweave freely. While in adulthood this state can be reached through art or religious activities, it can also be accessed through acts of play, which are always also categorized as an experience.²⁰² By talking of a connection between transitional space and playing, it becomes clear that one of the main demands of this phenomenon is the detachment from the rational, ordinary world.²⁰³ This area of play that is not internal, yet also not fully external according to Winnicott develops “from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences.”²⁰⁴ It is thus the same space adapted to the needs of the experience at hand. The transitional space is the gateway for the emergence of

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 55.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 56; 67.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 68; 70; 72.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 56.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 55; The potential space is the same as the transitional space.

²⁰² Ibid., 67.

²⁰³ Ibid., 69.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

playing and cultural experience, providing them an area that is not constricted by societal rules.²⁰⁵ The manner in which humans play defines how they learn to experience the world and allows them to explore their entire personality, forming the 'self' through their creativity.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, people construct groups in accordance to how they experience their surroundings, leading to the formation of social and cultural communities.²⁰⁷ It is hereby argued by Winnicott, that cultural experiences are direct descendants of transitional phenomena and activities of play that take place during childhood, as these are all recurring elements throughout human life.²⁰⁸ The form of the transitional space and the way in which we process experiences is not biologically determined, it is created through the living experiences that we encounter throughout our lives.²⁰⁹

Now that playing has been discussed in a variety of approaches, I would like to return to the role of art experience and how it is formed, in order to finally circle back to the distinct case of Instagram Museums. It has been previously argued that in order for the transitional space to open up, the artwork needs to cause rupture, a break from the rational world that transports the visitor beyond it. According to Vékony, this process necessitates specific types of art, often very powerful, mainly contemporary art that can move beyond representation and is of a certain higher quality. While this can certainly be one way of reaching a profound art experience, I argue that Winnicott's writings can be understood as opening up the possibility for another one. Playing is one of the first ways in which children begin accessing the transitional space regularly, a phenomenon which is maintained also into adulthood. This would mean that if playing could be brought into the space of the artwork, the object would not need rupture in order to access the transitional space, rather relying on the playful interaction. Even though this is perhaps a simple approach, it could allow for less 'valuable' artworks of any type or form to have the possibility of provoking a profound art experience for its visitors. This has multiple consequences not only in terms of the type of artworks that are considered important, but

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 71-72.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 86; 73.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 4; 18.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 133.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 146.

also on the educational opportunities of institutions and the reevaluation of the role of the visitor in museums. By recognizing the benefits of playing within the museum, interaction could become a central element in cultural institutions, allowing visitors to (re)gain their agency and narratives within the space.

Playing (on) Instagram

Through the use of digital tools in all urban spaces, playing is becoming more intertwined with daily life, placing the virtual in a state of in betweenness.²¹⁰ The virtual space of social media follows a different order than that of ordinary society, even though it remains closely linked to it, allowing it to cultivate playful behaviours throughout the platform.²¹¹ Many contemporary game studies scholars, such as Adriana De Souza E Silva, Larissa Hjorth or Valerie Frissen, are detaching from Huizinga and Caillois' consideration that play cannot occur in the context of ordinary life.²¹² The constant connection of the physical space to the virtual, is impacting real life experiences and relationships, giving way for increasingly more interactions to be understood as playful.²¹³ As play is often a result of social engagements, by raising the frequency with which people interact on a daily basis through social media platforms, it is inevitable that playing is becoming more abundant.²¹⁴ Smartphones and the social networks that they are tied to are giving everyday urban spaces the possibility to encompass activities of play.²¹⁵ As most current games are related to the use of a phone or external technological tool, we are arguably more aware that the activity we are engaging in is playful and hereby can place ourselves both in and outside of the area of play.²¹⁶ However, remembering Caillois' alienation, it becomes

²¹⁰ De Souza e Silva and Hjorth, "Playful Urban Spaces," 604.

²¹¹ Miller, *Play Theory and Implications*, 35.

²¹² De Souza e Silva and Hjorth, "Playful Urban Spaces," 604; Frissen et al., *Playful Identities*, 19.

²¹³ Lee, "Digital Cameras, Personal Photography," 266; De Souza e Silva and Hjorth, "Playful Urban Spaces," 604.

²¹⁴ De Souza e Silva and Hjorth, "Playful Urban Spaces," 604.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 621.

²¹⁶ Frissen et al., *Playful Identities*, 20.

questionable whether the younger generations that spend an average of three hours per day on social media, are still truly conscious of the 'roles' they are playing online.²¹⁷

As a primarily social platform, the relationships built and maintained through Instagram are a central factor to users. The aesthetic communities that are constructed through preferences of style, can also be understood as play communities. The people involved in a specific group have united together based on similar experiences and all follow the same rules of posting, while being active in a specifically designated space.²¹⁸ This can be observed in the interviewees' behaviours as both Amy and Clara went to the MoIC in order to feel more included in the community, posting selfies of themselves in recognizable installations and even posing in similar ways (Fig. 10&11). Similarly, after visiting the Voorlinden, Betty was excited to share the snapshots of her experience with her followers as she believed that it would convince them to visit it as well. By displaying the installations on their pages, the visitors could feel included in the community surrounding the visual style adopted by the museums. Going even a step further, most audiences of Instagram Museums, including the interview participants, ended up tagging the museum in order to become more clearly linked to the space, appearing under the hashtag of the establishment. Consequently, the communities of Instagram become easily recognizable and sorted through the words or places users choose to tag in their posts. These habits reflect Winnicott's argument for unity through comparable practices and Cailliois' insistence on the obedience of rules in playing.²¹⁹ Hashtags and the tagging of a location becomes an unspoken rule of entering a distinct community. Through the creation of an online persona to suit a specific aesthetic, each user turns their virtual practices into forms of mimicry, selecting a potentially disguising username and using filters as masks, which detach the person from their ordinary self.²²⁰ This is a custom that is encouraged by Instagram specifically, compared to other social media platforms, actively encouraging its users to create multiple accounts, in order to showcase various

²¹⁷ Denis Metev, "How Much Time Do People Spend on Social Media in 2020," Review 42, 2021. Accessed: 16 April 2021, <https://review42.com/resources/how-much-time-do-people-spend-on-social-media/>.

²¹⁸ Miller, *Play Theory and Implications*, 6.

²¹⁹ Cailliois, *Man, Play and Games*, 7.

²²⁰ Miller, *Play Theory and Implications*, 6.

sides of their personality.²²¹ The rise of *Finstas* – fake Instagram accounts – has allowed for increasingly more playful behaviours to be featured online, granting the players the ability to slip in and out of characters as quickly as changing between accounts.

As an indispensable social media tool, the contemporary reinterpretation of the mask as a filter resonates with Caillois' consideration that playing itself can change but its function does not.²²² The mimetic play that takes place through social media platforms and especially Instagram, benefits of many opportunities for adjusting one's appearance. Face filters come in an increasingly large variety, allowing users to turn their faces into animal figures or change distinct facial elements such as their nose size or the length of their eyelashes. The constant use of such distorting filters as part of one's Instagram character has become common practice, with Leaver, Highfield and Abidin stating that: "Instagram filters (...) offered different aesthetics of normalization."²²³ The high frequency of heavy filter use is becoming an alienating phenomenon, blurring the line between what is real and what is not. This is just one of the many effects that Instagram has on the distortion of the world outside of the platform, affecting the image people have of themselves. In the context of museum experiences the increasingly alienating force of Instagram is shaping the types of experiences people strive for. By wanting to be constantly surrounded by trendy objects, visitors are creating a strict selection process of the types of spaces that they want to be seen in. It is hereby ultimately the online personas that are being created by users that have been determining the popularity of Instagram Museums.

Play in the Instagram Museum

Instagram Museums are a uniquely popular phenomenon in current society, combining the social media connectivity that visitors are longing for with Instagram aesthetics and high levels of interactivity. As previously seen, this engagement within these museums

²²¹ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 17.

²²² Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 59.

²²³ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 56.

takes on the form of play and turns the visits into fun and relaxing experiences. The interviews I conducted included a discussion on play, which revealed that visitors did indeed consider the engagement with the props to be an act of playing, when the object offered high interactivity. Even though they visited different spaces, both Amy and Diana considered that installations that children were enjoying the most and that had nostalgic effects for them were the most playful. For example rooms such as the sprinkle pool or spaces containing swings, were more likely to encompass playful behaviours. New Yorker journalist Sophie Haigney jokes about such elements saying that people are striving increasingly more for experiences that remind them of childhood games and playgrounds, seeking the amusement and enjoyment they had felt in their youth, however, reinterpreted to fit current aesthetics.²²⁴ Ellen even mentioned recalling the excitement of being in an amusement park when waiting in line to enter *Swimming Pool*. The atmosphere that she could already see unfolding inside of the installation made the experience all the more stimulating. Such seemingly small additions to the museum experience that adhere to visitor preferences are becoming increasingly important to be observed and analysed, as many do not feel that traditional museums are adapting and staying relevant to current times and needs.²²⁵

A notable and unexpected conclusion to come from the interviews was the weight given to the recurring sense of 'fun'. Upon being asked to describe the overall experience, every single participant of both studies used the word fun. This was often placed in relation to the way that they played within the museums, as Amy, Betty and Diana stated that it was the interactions that made the experience so enjoyable. This connects to all the aforementioned definitions of play, as one of the most central elements and primary benefits discussed by all three authors, was its amusing, pleasurable function. Moreover, especially in the case of the Voorlinden, the playing happened in a space that was physically detached from the outside world, as the museum's location is tranquil and surrounded by nature. While they are placed in the center of large cities, in the case of the MoIC the extreme installations and bright colors that make it appear almost

²²⁴ Sophie Haigney, The Museums of Instagram. Culture Desk. The New Yorker. 2018. Accessed: 12 March 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-museums-of-instagram>.

²²⁵ Høffding, Rung and Roald, "Participation and Receptivity," 71.

hallucinatory as well as the bright pink facades (Fig. 12) clearly separate it from its surroundings. Whether the state of the visitors while playing was fully detached from their ordinary life cannot be guaranteed, as the interviews did not aim at exploring their specific state of mind, however, it could be assumed so based on the descriptions of the visit being unique, relaxing and reminiscent of their childhood games. As the virtual space of social media does not intervene in the playful relationship with the space and as the museums themselves seem to be different from the ordinary world, either through unrealistically colorful objects in the MoIC or the selection of a secluded location in the case of the Voorlinden, it does seem that the experiences can be quite clearly be categorized as playing, accessing the transitional space.

One crucial finding clarifying the potential benefits of the MoIC appeared through Clara's account of the visit. As an influencer, she went to the museum with the aim of producing content for her social media, therefore to work. In accordance with Huzinga, Caillois and Winnicott's writings, Clara said that she did not feel that she herself had played in the space. She did recognize that people around her were exhibiting playful behaviours, but she was far more concentrated on capturing a picture her followers would be interested in. This means that even though the museum offers an interactive experience, it still remains adaptable enough to function according to the preference of the visitor. While Clara did not play and mainly attended the exhibition as an Instagram backdrop, she did note that she found the experience educational, retaining some of the information offered by the posters in the MoIC. In other words, based on the interactively inviting character of the space she was more prone to consume and process the information that was provided by the museum, even though that was not her aim. While this interview featured too small of a participant set in order to fully explore the extent to which this openness to learning appears in visitors, the fact that the person who had the least interest in it felt as if the experience was educational is a good indicator that this could be a strong influence on how the museum experience is processed. Adults could retain larger amounts of information even involuntarily, if they are given the opportunity to play and be exposed to educational aspects simultaneously.²²⁶

²²⁶ Van Vleet and Feeney, "Play Behavior and Playfulness," 639.

Playing is an integral part of human life and it is becoming increasingly more integrated in the experiences that adults seek. Establishments that promote entertainment and enjoyment have seen a stable popularity surge in the past decade, leaving their mark on the further development of traditional cultural institutions. While traditional museums have fought to keep their status as serious organizations, separate from the entertainment industry, it is becoming inevitable for them to advance as pillars of the experience economy. By welcoming social media and interactive, playful behaviours within their walls, the future of museums could be heading towards the model of the Instagram Museum, promoting their growth and making them essential socio-cultural institutions once again.

Epilogue - Recommendations for Traditional Museums

This thesis has discussed a variety of facets of the social media impact on the museal industry and how and why Instagram Museums are taking up so much attention in our current society. However, for the final part, I would like to take a look once more at these elements with the goal of formulating them into possible recommendations for traditional art museums, by extracting in what ways these successful methods are applicable in more conservative institutions. There are four main categories that these proposals can be divided into: social media presence, business model, the role of the visitor and interactivity.

A traditional art museum will never be able to and should never take on the same exaggerated, overly colorful aesthetic traits of gallery-like Instagram Museums, as it can visually appeal to the masses by following its own approach. The first step in establishing a relationship with the public is maintaining a strong social media presence. A museum needs to be similar to a brand, meaning that it should have a clear (online) identity, preferably one which can be visually pleasing on a screen. As the Instagram feed algorithms were altered a few years back, it is now not only important to post often, but to have as much engagement as possible in order to stay relevant.²²⁷ This means that the content of a museum's Instagram page should be varied in terms of providing both educational and fun elements which are quickly consumed by a scrolling follower. The more likes, comments, shares or saves a page attracts, the higher up and more often it will appear on a follower's feed. In order to maximize engagement while maintaining a visual templatability, Museum Voorlinden's Instagram page features a selection of artworks that are on display with their caption reading basic information on the objects followed by a short quote, explanation or question, making them easily readable, interactive and inspirational at times. Each post also features multiple hashtags at the bottom of each picture, displaying a combination of more specific ones such as the artist's name but also more general words such as #photography, #portrait or #art. The purpose of these is to make the posts appear in many searches of Instagram users and inspire

²²⁷ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, *Instagram*, 18.

visitors to post under similar categories, creating and appealing to specific communities. By posting varied content multiple times a day, the Voorlinden's page remains interesting to older and newer followers. As attracting young audiences remains a challenge for many art museums, the use of Instagram by and in the museum, offers the opportunity of bringing the objects and spaces closer into their preferences.²²⁸ Such practices create an online community surrounding the museum, an aspect which has been shown to contribute greatly to the popularity of Instagram Museums.

Continuing down this road of developing a museum's characteristic identity, it is important that art institutions step away from trying to define themselves as strictly educational spaces. While it should remain a primary focus of the museum to share its knowledge, it would be far easier to fulfill this aim by becoming more approachable. This could be achieved through a more relaxed image, showcasing the adaptability of the museum space and promoting the museum as a place of interaction amongst visitors and with objects. Applying elements of the pop-up model by organizing varied, limited exhibitions in unusual spaces would raise the popularity of an institution, portraying it as a modern and desirable experience. The creation of welcoming spaces such as large foyers with comfortable seating or cafes featuring novelty foods could contribute to the change of the museums' image, as has been shown by the MoIC's use of edible attractions.²²⁹ Furthermore, considering the ban on phone photography, as many museums have already understood, it is doing these institutions more harm than good. A lack of pictures of the space means that they are getting less exposure online and are having to work harder on their publicity. It is also making them less attractive to younger audiences that strive to record every experience. As previously mentioned in chapter 1, the ban on photography was named as the main unfavorable feature of traditional museums, which drove interview participants to opt for experiences such as the MoIC. Even more importantly the openness to photography allows for discussions concerning the museum and its objects to be opened up to the larger public, inviting more voices to contribute, resonating with the aims of traditional institutions.²³⁰

²²⁸ Suess, "Instagram and Art Gallery Visitors," 108.

²²⁹ Sedgwick, Katrina, *The Future of the Museum*, Interview by Andras Szántó, 272.

²³⁰ Manuel Charr, "What we can learn from Pop-Up Museums? Best practice and ideas from Instagram friendly experiences." Museum Next. 2019. Accessed: 12 March 2021.

People are continuously striving for increasingly more immersive activities, preferring spaces that allow them more liberties in adapting their experience to their liking.²³¹ Museums can broaden their appeal by increasing the participatory traits of their displays, allowing for spaces to be more adaptable and the role of the visitor to become more central.²³² Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's post-museum theory arguing for the involvement of visitors and the consideration of their individual contexts has been present for two decades already, however, it is still lacking in application.²³³ The current Instagram Museums bear arguably the closest resemblance to such refined institutions, by focusing on their audience through the implementation of highly engaging installations. Interactive displays and artworks require the engagement of the audience, hereby making them active participants rather than letting them passively observe the objects. Active involvement sets Instagram Museums apart from traditional institutions that force a carefully curated narrative on its audience. Providing engagements which do not need to be only educational, but can also be fun and playful would change the approach society has to museums, being more likely to opt for them as activities to frequent during their free-time. Playing has been shown to be beneficial in any form it appears, hereby making its active inclusion in the museum a favorable opportunity for the institutions to enhance their popularity. Museums can be both educational and entertaining without having to compromise on their aims and status. Encouraging playful behaviours within the museum would lend exhibitions a certain theatricality that invites a closer relationship between visitors and objects, hereby heightening the audience's willingness to process the information offered.²³⁴ By allowing everyone and everything to contribute to the creation of the museum's atmosphere and message, through visitors' physical and online presence, these institutions would automatically become more open to adapting to the needs of society.

While the type of art that is on display is important in terms of the attractiveness of the museum and its interactive opportunities – as contemporary participatory artworks

<https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-we-can-learn-from-pop-up-museums-best-practice-and-ideas-from-instagram-friendly-experiences/>.

²³¹ Wahler, Marc-Olivier, *The Future of the Museum*, Interview by Andras Szántó, 313.

²³² Høffding, Rung and Roald, "Participation and Receptivity," 72.

²³³ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation*, 152; Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, 26.

²³⁴ Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, 124.

are more likely to appeal to a more varied audience through higher engagement – it is also crucial that the space itself provides an experience.²³⁵ Spaces which can be altered by the visitors, or at least give the feeling thereof, maintain the image of an innovative institution, as each visit will be different from the last. Many of the Voorlinden's visitors were returning customers, desiring to experience the space anew in different company or explore the novel exhibitions. They were hereby coming back knowing that there would be something new to experience in the museum. Creating such an image is important for any museum in this day and age if they wish to maintain a steady flow of visitors. A space that adapts to its audience but also the location it finds itself in is more likely to build communities and (re)gain an important status in a given culture.²³⁶

Each of these elements on its own would already contribute to the improvement of museums' status, making them more relevant to our contemporary society. There are many museums that have already applied certain versions of the aforementioned recommendations, however, it is not yet enough. Taking into consideration the bitter effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the museal field, institutions need to adapt to and welcome digital and playful components even quicker than before. Many museums have refused to become part of the social media trend, yet it is becoming crucial that they leave prejudices of this virtual space behind. Popularity on platforms such as Instagram is becoming the decisive factor in the real life success of businesses, and its effects on the museological industry are becoming increasingly more obvious. Implementing the profitable methods of Instagram Museums in the traditional field would turn art museums into fruitful spaces, where digital, entertaining and educational elements could come together in order to provide visitors with memorable experiences. Even though the museal landscape is demanding active and immediate changes, museums still have ample opportunities to grow into institutions which are essential and influential for society and protect their status.

²³⁵ Naomi Rea, "As Museums Fall in Love With 'Experiences,' Their Core Missions Face Redefinition." *ArtNet News*. 2019. Accessed: 15 March 2021. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/experience-economy-museums-1486807>.

²³⁶ Budge, "Objects in Focus," 69.

Image List

Fig. 1: Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Room - *Filled with the Brilliance of Life*, 2011, Mirrored glass, wood, aluminum, plastic, ceramic and LED, Tate, London, UK.



Fig. 2: Museum of Ice Cream, "Shade of Pink," Instagram photo, 6 March 2021.



Fig. 3: Museum of Ice Cream, “Scented Wallpaper,” Instagram photo, 27 November 2017.



Fig. 4: Museum of Ice Cream, “Ice Cream Shop,” Instagram photo, 27 April 2019.



Fig. 5: Museum of Ice Cream, “Tinder Swing Room,” Instagram photo, 6 February 2018.



Fig. 6: Museum Voorlinden,
“Swimming Pool” Instagram photo,
30 October 2020.

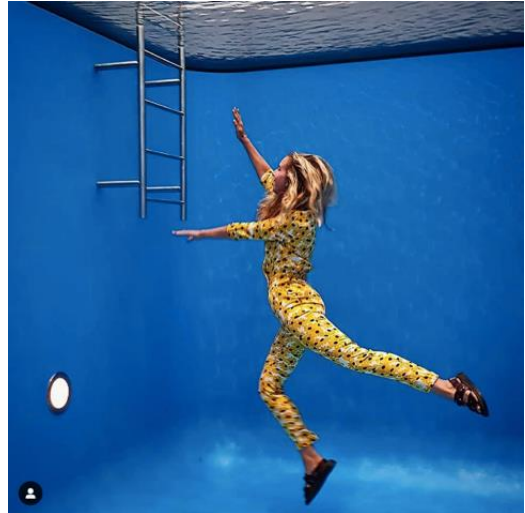


Fig. 7: Museum Voorlinden, “Open
Ended” Instagram photo, 9 April
2021.



Fig. 8: Amy’s Selfie in Museum
Voorlinden, Instagram photo, 27
January 2021.



Fig. 9: Museum of Ice Cream,
“Sprinkle Pool,” Instagram photo, 1
May 2019.



Fig. 10: Amy's Selfie in the MoIC,
Instagram photo, 26 March 2021.



Fig. 11: Clara's Selfie in the MoIC,
Instagram photo, 16 February
2020.



Fig. 12: Museum of Ice Cream,
"New York MoIC Facade,"
Instagram photo, 22 December
2020.



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Fig. 7: Accessed: 4 June 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNbvUvZMzuY/>.

Fig. 9: Accessed: 4 June 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bw5e-1ph8eD/>.

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