Title of the presentation:

Virtual Museums of Małopolska as Practice-led Research: Towards Universal Cultural Rights

Name of the authors, organisation to which they belong and contact email:
Bartosz Wójcik
Małopolska Institute of Culture in Kraków, Poland
wojcik@mik.krakow.pl

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Introduction and key concepts of the paper:

Project-based and co-financed by the EU, [Virtual Museums of Małopolska](#) (VMM) is an open-access and user-friendly portal run by the Regional Digitisation Lab (RDL), part of the Małopolska Institute of Culture (MIK), based in Kraków, Poland. **It is underpinned by the principle of digital cultural legacy as a universal and necessary right.** Within this framework, **VMM aims to provide a free-of-charge, widely accessible public service.**

Established in 2010, VMM operates within the cultural heritage sector, digitising both the finest and most valuable (as well as seemingly unassuming, overlooked, and commonplace) items collected by participating museums in the Małopolska region. Standout collections include (primarily) twentieth-century Roma exhibits and physical objects digitised as part of "Oshpitzin means Oświęcim", a collaborative project conducted with the Jewish Museum in Oświęcim, which aims to showcase everyday life through the lens of the Kluger Family House, the family residence where Szymon Kluger (1925–2000), the last Jewish inhabitant of Oświęcim, lived.

Envisioned as an inclusive, socially sustainable space, VMM is a work in progress that currently features 2,655 exhibits (and counting). Over 80 per cent of the digitised content is in the public domain and is licensed under a CC BY. **In short, the mission guiding our activities is to contribute to the development of "informed cultural citizens" (Veloso et al. 2021), by offering them - regardless of their geographical location - access to cultural welfare as a matter of right; an arts and culture approximation of Universal Basic Income.** This can be seen as an update of the notion of culture as one of the basic human rights, as introduced in Article 22 of "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Kowalik 2021).

To us, as editors of VMM, access and accessibility are more than a fashion accessory or a legal obligation. Viewing digitalisation as a complex and collective process (from digitisation proper to visualisation to online publishing to popularisation), we are committed to developing VMM as a means of inclusion (WCAG standards, free access), as a carrier of diversity (thematic and institutional), and as a tool of education (online exhibitions and contextual articles).

VMM has a unique responsibility, which reflects MIC's core ideas (Region, React, Rethink): a curatorial and storytelling role in shaping our repository of digitised exhibits from Małopolska (re-contextualisation, critical reframing), in inviting registered users to engage with the portal and curate their own collections (both through VMM and our Sketchfab account), and in "broadening access to artistic experiences and spaces to encompass marginalised groups" (Veloso et al. 2021). This last component is, by the way, **what Małopolska Empathetic Culture, MIC's pioneering programme of progressive audience development and user experience, advocates.**

Research methodology:

With these noble goals in mind, and it the light of the fact - emphasised among others by Thomas Piketty (2014) - that "[o[wnership of wealth has become increasingly unequal" (Crocker 2015), one cannot, however, shy away from **pressing real-life concerns embedded in VMM**, our flagship digitisation project. **For access to culture to become a universal right**, at least as far as VMM is

concerned, there are experiential challenges to be faced, a collective action to be taken, resources to be channelled, and project obligations (targets) to be recalibrated. This is all in line with the Regional Development Strategy "Małopolska 2030".

Long-run, grant-based teamwork-specific initiatives, such as VMM, where measurable parameters are of paramount importance, face dynamic challenges and **identity questions** that are triggered by the years of accumulated, lived institutional experience. In particular, whether the project should continue its **tried-and-tested existence as a single unit** – a silo of digital content: an expanding archive of downloadable hi-res photos and 3D models – or whether it should **apply a more bifurcated, self-reflective post-growth approach**? Namely, to keep on digitising items of cultural heritage, but to allow more time to gradually edit, curate and more effectively disseminate the already digitised exhibits, while paying closer attention to audience development, to their continued engagement, to more inclusive representation practices, and to be more reflective of the changing world around. This would allow us to curate online and offline programming as well as to better, as the Call for Papers invites us to do, "tackle the universal needs of the general public and the specific needs of various communities and groups".

Main results and conclusions:

To answer the above dilemma, the presentation will examine the validity of the proposed new approach, **testing it against available – thematic and formal – project options (as suggested by VMM team members and discussed in a workshop setting in October 2022), against requisite forms of accessibility and projected challenges to the sustainability of VMM as a Universal Cultural Rights project**. Hopefully, the presentation will culminate with, providing a relevant methodology is established, a strong case for the quality of user experience to be considered a quantifiable factor (project parameter) in cultural policymaking.

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