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INTERVIEWER: Hello, and welcome to We Roar. As coronavirus continues to challenge our lives and communities, we're asking Princetonians everywhere to share how they're working through the crisis, how their world looks different in its shadows, and what new insights have emerged. In this episode, we hear from the museum community, which faces financial devastation from the pandemic.

JAMES STEWARD: I'm James Steward, and I'm director of the Princeton University Art Museum.

So the simple reality is that there are tremendous numbers of cultural nonprofits that operate on extremely thin margins under the best of circumstances. Um, the average museum charges an admission fee, is therefore dependent on the numbers of visitors that enter that institution. When you go from whatever the number of visitors might be under normal circumstances to effectively zero in an all but overnight turn of events, it has meant, of course, that many museums are facing, frankly, existential crises.

It's been estimated that as many as 30% of the museums in the United States won't survive this crisis. In the early weeks of COVID, not a day went by that we didn't hear about museums that were laying off almost the entirety of their staffs. How does a museum come back from having laid off 97% of its people? What are the societal impacts of doing that? Their capacity is going to be significantly diminished for a very long while.

Out of this comes for me a question that I'm asking myself daily, which is do our responsibilities change in the face of that landscape? Do — do we have new moral responsibilities, as well as, perhaps, practical responsibilities, because we do come from a place of privilege, a place in which, yes, even though we are undergoing financial stresses without question, we are sheltered from the — the most severe forms of those stresses. If other museums in our region, for example, that have traditionally served really important community engagement purposes are less able to do so, do we need to

evolve our practices? Do we need to platform the wider capacity that Princeton University affords in different ways?

We are a museum that has, I think, been profoundly committed to increasing access, overcoming access challenges, being a museum that — that honors equity and diversity. And it, of course, is clear in the wider COVID environment that COVID is a disease that does not attack with equity, shall we say. And so it has reminded me that I think we, as a museum, have to grapple with the equity question in a somewhat different set of ways than we might have imagined six months ago.

One very specific example of, I think, an equity challenge is — is the simple fact that the museum community does not look like the population of the United States in the 21st century. It skews very white. It skews towards privilege for a host of reasons, including the fact that historically, museum jobs have paid badly. People who need to make a living wage have sometimes not seen the museum sector as viable for them if they don't bring other resources to the table.

These are issues that I'm happy to say the museum community has — has really begun grappling with — though, aggressively, only in relatively recent years. But if museums are now shrinking rather than growing, um, how do we help assure that there are early career opportunities for people who might not traditionally have had access to careers in the arts and humanities? One very pragmatic step I'd — I'd like to take is to create a new corpus of early professional roles within our museum that would be paid, professional jobs that afford early professional experience for individuals of color, for first generation college students, for others who are maybe not fully represented in the museum field writ large.

Is this going to address the scope of the national problem? Obviously not. Um, but I think we have to live our values at a time when, frankly, many museums that are deeply committed to those values will struggle to do so because of the kind of financial reckoning that this moment represents.

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Absolutely, there are silver linings. I think that COVID in the lockdown has had the effect of clarifying our core sense of mission and vision. I think, uh, another silver lining is the

opening-out of audience. The onset of the coronavirus caused us to have to pivot very quickly to, frankly, becoming another kind of museum. And I think that's been true of the museum field writ large. Most of us that are "collecting institutions" really privilege the experience of works of art in the original. You know, that's at the core of our understanding of our mission.

And when it became quickly clear that we were going to not be able to allow visitors to come into our galleries — and I'm now saying this in a national and international way — we had to pivot very quickly to thinking about what alternative value might look like, how to create digital opportunities that have legitimacy in their own terms, that are, if I can put it this way, reasonable alternatives to "the in-person experience of the hand of the artist." I would say, at Princeton, we've had certain advantages in this regard because of the fact that we for some years now have been working on developing a new art museum. We had begun the work of thinking about how to deliver more of our content digitally because of a construction project facing us in the future.

We'd begun thinking about distance learning. I think therefore we had a leg up, if you will, of thinking about how to, to, to turn that spigot on really fast. But it still means — it feels to me that we're learning every week about what works and what doesn't work and about the importance of varying some of these platforms.

We've had some great success of launching or sustaining our "Late Thursdays" programs in a digital format. But it also became very clear quickly that a sameness could creep into that programming very fast if we weren't really attentive to mixing it up, um, affording different formats, platforms, um, etcetera, that afford moments for people to participate in an active way. It's so easy to translate it into the passive model. And I think that just goes against so much of what we've been as a field trying to do institutionally for, for 10 or 20 years now.

And so that is, of course, also opening our eyes to thinking about things like the fact that every individual and every family doesn't have a, a similar access to information technology, to hardware, to software, to broadband platforms that enable the kinds of learning moments that we might want to privilege. And so I foresee, for example, partnering more aggressively with social service organizations, maybe not our usual art world partners, in order to try to find remedies that grapple with some of those really fundamental impediments, um, around technology or around access.

If we overlay that with the vivid reminders of how deep-rooted racism continues to be in American society, it provokes me to recognize that both digitally and, in the future, spatially, when we return to built spaces and actual objects, that we have to double-down our commitment to the continuing diversification of our collections, the continuing opening-out of our and sharing of our voice, of inviting more voices to the table, of maybe even, in the academic environment, expanding our definitions of what expertise looks like. So it's a very rich stew at the moment of, kind of, interweaving these various issues.

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