

# Paola Antonelli

## Voices (Towards Other Institutions) #25



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1562 / Cover image for MoMA R&D Salon 28 “Angels”.

### MUSEUMS AS THE R&D OF SOCIETY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural institutions in New York State were relegated to Phase Four—with theaters and outdoor professional sports, after restaurants, hair salons, and clothing stores. Deemed the least essential among businesses, they had to wait until July 20th to reopen. All the while, other socioeconomic, political, environmental, and humanitarian crises both local and global proliferated like fungi on the devastation wreaked by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, connecting in networks and feeding each other's ecosystems.

We who work for them, like to think that cultural institutions of all types and sizes are especially crucial when major crises hit, and the events of 2020 seem to have reinforced our faith. Some institutions and curators (I, for one) however are wading through a productive identity crisis. How can we be of service, whether our physical doors are open or not, when people are losing their jobs to the economic paralysis or their homes to wildfires, protesting deadly racism, trying to save democracy, or succumbing to the virus by the hundreds of thousands? Who do we serve, and can we offer

them something they really need? In “normal” times, the answer varies widely depending on whom you ask in which institution, and where. In times of deep turmoil, though, urgency trumps granularity in favor of a clear-cut and shared agenda: survival—of peoples, of cultures, of the institutions themselves.

I believe that museums can be R&D labs for society. Because of my anxious nature, MoMA’s R&D Department, which I founded in 2012, has always been focused on survival. It began as an idea during the crisis of 2008, when the financial world’s betrayal became an opportunity to demonstrate that the cultural sector—often discounted as superfluous, an optional feature external to the real economy—can instead contribute the kind of dependable, sustainable slow progress that can truly benefit society. Culture, in other words, is essential for any social system to survive and thrive.

In the seven years from 2012 to 2019, R&D complemented MoMA’s exhibitions cycle, publications, and public programs with small but wide-reaching forums discussing topics that mattered to all—from ageing and death to anger, truth, and the importance of words—with the goal of showing that museums can support and inspire citizens in every facet of life, well beyond their hallowed halls and walls. We called them R&D Salons and convened them in one of MoMA’s theaters. They were preceded by a thoughtful reading list circulated a few days ahead, culminated in a live conversation with speakers from diverse backgrounds, punctuated by video contributions, livestreamed, and were followed by a reception where we would keep discussing, sometimes for hours. They are all gathered [in a website](#) , for future perusal.

The last live Salon, on February 10th, 2020, was about Dogs. When the lockdown descended upon us and migrating online might have seemed the natural course, I was surprised to feel that such existential matters were best tackled in physical communion and shared focus with a few dozen other humans. I used the time to ponder whether the department’s mission should change to adapt to the changed circumstances but the list of our offerings—incitements to hope and resolve; examples of creativity, perspective, and criticality; parables of empathy, tolerance, and

respect—seems to transcend even the whiplashes of this year. If anything, this crisis brought me back to the beginning: in order to survive and thrive as a society, we need to remind all that culture *is* essential business.

*Paola Antonelli is Senior Curator at The Museum of Modern Art in the Department of Architecture & Design, as well as MoMA's founding Director of Research & Development. Her most recent MoMA installation, Broken Nature - a version of the XXII Triennale di Milano by the same name, which she also curated - opened in November 2020. In collaboration with critic Alice Rawsthorn, Antonelli is currently working on @design.emergency, an Instagram and book project on the role of design in building a better future for all.*