

# Art and Crisis 1 — 7

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## INTRODUCTION

Art never stands still, even when theatres, museums, concert halls and galleries are closed. The Covid-19 pandemic threatened to render art inaccessible, precisely at a time when it is perhaps more necessary than ever. Try to imagine being quarantined at home without films, without books, without music.

The doors to art may have closed, but thinking about it will not. The enforced hiatus and relative isolation is also a moment for rethinking the arts. That's why West initiated the weekly series of open reflection on art and crisis, on the platform *Thuistezien.nl*.

The resulting texts represent a multifaceted (and still growing) series of reflections by thinkers, essayists, artists, scientists, makers, each with their own perspective on what is happening, what may await us, or how this crisis relates to earlier ones in history.

These pieces were written in the period from mid-March to mid-May 2020, in various phases of the pandemic, in which events progressed so quickly that certain assumptions and observations were already out of date before the text was published. The present compilation necessarily arrives with an even greater delay for the reader, which provides, in addition to the comforting readability of a printed document, a historical document of the time, testifying to how the art world did not come to a standstill during the standstill.

The Hague, 10 May 2020  
Akiem Helmling & Christian Weijts



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**Rethinking the social sculpture**  
**An exploration in twelve propositions**  
Akiem Helmling & Christiaan Weijs

- 1 No-one predicted that the 3rd decade of the 21st century would begin with the world in a sudden stasis, populations forced to stay at home, tourist spots turned into ghost towns, planes remaining on the ground.

We are currently experiencing an unexpected, and in some ways unprecedented break with normality. Though on the surface, everyone tries to make the necessary adjustments to continue with their lives. Yet at the same time everything is cast in a strange and uncertain light. The pandemic forces us to improvise.

- 2 This is not an artistic crisis. A lifeless virus has brought about a global biological danger to all humanity.

In the midst of this pandemic, with full hospitals, rising death rates and an economic malaise that has a real chance to deepen, it may seem unethical to occupy ourselves with seemingly less important concerns such as art.

Yet this crisis situation presents situations and challenges that artists in particular have been familiar with for some time: distorted reality, insecurity, alienation, trying to find one's way by touch, feeling one's way through unfamiliar terrain.

- 3 'Everyone is an artist, but only the artist knows it'. The French artist and filmmaker Pierre Bismuth once inscribed this text on a museum wall in Lithuania. He was not the first to consider art as having an inherently human dimension. For example, shortly before his death Marcel Duchamp stated in an interview that the distinction between artist and non-artist was superfluous, artificial and restrictive.

The German Joseph Beuys regarded community as a 'social sculpture', an object formed by the behaviour and choices of each individual in society, which results in the assertion that everyone is an artist.

Duchamp recognizes the implicit creative dimension in humanity, Beuys points to our common social responsibility, and perhaps Bismuth's statement is about the possible superiority of art. Art is a possibility that is immanent in everyone, but that not everyone can 'see'.

- 4 'Everyone is an artist, but only the artist knows it'. It's a sentence that runs the risk of ending up on coffee mugs and in Facebook posts, an amusing quote, which does not encourage us to think through the consequences.

The current break with the status quo reveals that our world is not an established fact for which there is no alternative. The semblance of normality, the assumption that the world is as it is, can be transformed by art into its opposite. Nothing is certain or normal any more. Democracy, global capitalism, prosperity, human rights, privacy: these are all constructed by us collectively. They are not a necessary outcome dictated by natural laws, they are our social sculpture, which we have shaped collectively, progressively through the generations.

It is frightening to be open to the fact that nothing within our social sculpture is absolute and unshakeable, and that there are always alternative possibilities to any certainty. At the same time it can be liberating to accept this. It is precisely this ambiguous, disruptive interplay that artists have explored.

The artist can make us aware that we can collectively use our imagination to give shape to social sculpture.

- 5 '*Nous sommes en guerre,*' declared French President Macron. Mark Rutte called it the most serious crisis 'outside of wartime'. We're fighting a biological enemy, but which one? Is it really only about that virus, that non-living flotsam of genetic material, or also about the world we built which has made possible the rapid global spread of the virus?

The corona crisis calls into question our global growth economy, the way we treat animals, bio-technology, mass tourism. All those parts of our social sculpture that until recently we thought were inevitable and inescapable, it is suddenly revealed, could be brought to a standstill in an incredibly short period of time.

With the same surprising speed, it seems that human rights and personal freedoms once considered inviolable can be pushed aside. We are under collective house arrest. Surveillance cameras monitor us, sometimes on drones, to make sure we are at least a metre and a half away from each other. Rights that were untouchable, turn out to be expendable. The social sculpture is suddenly extremely malleable, not cast in bronze.

- 6** Are there other, more far-reaching measures to imagine? If the physical lockdown is ultimately an effective remedy against the spread of a virus, mightn't there also be an equivalent in terms of economic consequences? A kind of 'economic lockdown' to counter the impending impoverishment of a society?

Imagine if the government were to demand that, from now on, no one takes more than they need. We now know that there is enough for everyone. What would a 'monetary quarantine' look like? What would be more difficult: being locked up at home with your family for a few months, or not asking for more than you need for a certain period of time, and sharing what you do need?

Imagine that the richest 1% of the population would take it for granted that it must guarantee the well being of the remaining 99%.

- 7** After the crisis in 2008, everything was aimed at getting back to normal as much as possible. The banks had to be rescued, the financial structure had to be restored, the

economy had to get back on the track of ever accelerating and rising growth.

Which society do we want? Are we going to rebuild the old status quo brick by brick, or are we going to seize this forced interruption to imagine an alternative?

- 8** What the arts have demanded is now suddenly relevant. Rather than a global economy that exploits the earth, we can fashion one on the local and small-scale. We have long lived in a world where things were more important than ideas. Now we discover that our spiritual existence determines our humanity.

The world before this crisis was one dominated by competition, profit, efficiency. This crisis could be a radical turning point, in which such priorities give way to thinking from the point of view of possibilities.

Now that the world of the rentiers has virtually come to a standstill, we must explore new possibilities. Should we start experimenting with a basic income, helicopter money, fairer taxation of the multinationals? What was almost taboo just a few months ago is no longer unthinkable, in fact it is generally discussed now that nothing is fundamentally unthinkable anymore.

This is the no man's land where the artist feels at home, in the void between destruction and creation, where only the imagination – the power that sets us apart from other organisms – can guide us into possible futures.

- 9** The corona crisis confronts us in an unprecedented way with our conflicting human desires. While we accept staying home because it promises safety and order, at the same time we cannot accept it, because we experience it as unbearable. We are driven by conflicting desires, on the one hand for stability and on the other hand for transformation and renewal. The sandwich we crave in the morning gives us the

energy we need to make sure we don't spend the rest of our lives eating the same sandwich over and over again. At the same time it is impossible to think about this sandwich without it.

This process, that tension between continuity and renewal, determines ourselves and shapes society. In that respect, our 'social sculpture' is always a *work in progress*. It will only ever be completed when humanity no longer exists: the grand finale, in Beuys' understanding of art.

- 10** In 2015 the German authors Christian Saehrendt and Steen Kittl published a contemporary art manual. On the cover is a cartoon in which a man is looking at a painting. The painting consists of large white letters against a black background, which say 'Kannst du nicht'. The man responds: 'Das kann ich auch'.

Not being able to do something is often more difficult than being able to do it. Take the current situation, where we can't go to the theatre, can't meet up with friends and better not go to the beach. Of course one can argue that not being able to do all these things goes together with being able to stay home. And while this can be seen as a difference in perspective, it is of course ultimately about a much greater inability, namely, not being able to act freely in correspondence with what you want or don't want to do. We experience this as a hindrance to our freedom. We are afraid of not being able to live our own lives, but those of others.

- 11** In the spirit of Johan Cruijff one might say that in order to make a choice, you have to *be able* to make choices. In short: a choice can only be made if the choice is available for us. Where it is important to realize that it is not enough to know what choices are available, we have to be able to comprehend them. Take, for example, a person, who chooses to give away all his possessions and live on an

island. Even though one has read about this choice, this choice can not practically become a possible choice until one comprehends this man's choice. Until that point, the choice remains inconceivable. Doesn't art work in a similar way?

- 12** Though we have not chosen our existence, we are confined to it. The only choice we have is to decide what to do with this existence. In short, *that we exist* will always remain an incomprehensible fact for us; *what we are* is determined by *our* choices. This distinguishes us from each other and thereby shapes society. It is up to each of us to choose between staying at home and going to the beach; between reading a book or sitting at the cash register; between thinking of profit, or thinking of art.

Maybe the crisis gives us a new appreciation for art, by revealing our inability to know. This is a perspective in which Pierre Bismuth's statement is suddenly as meaningful and logical as quarantine at home, itself unthinkable until recently. This is the perspective whereby we recognize that we are the artists we have always been.



**The great superfluous**

Maarten Doorman



Nam June Paik, **TV-Buddha**, 1974. Collectie Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.  
Foto: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

On the very day the long-awaited Nam June Paik retrospective was to open at the Stedelijk Museum, the museum, like all art institutions in the Netherlands, was closed.

Nam June Paik's small, nearly fifty-year-old TV set, into which an antique Buddha stares at his own image projected *live* on the screen, was not turned on either. The camera was not on either. The screen remained dark.

Strangely, this stillborn day contributed something new to the famous installation. The power of the *TV Buddha*, as with many good works of art, lies in the apparent simplicity which conceals its complexity, in 'ever so beautifully lit waters' as Lucebert once wrote. A great many interpretations of the work have thus been proposed over the past few decades. For example, one surmises a reconciliation between East (Buddhism) and West (television), another, a critique of the empty emptiness of mass culture that literally reflects the utter emptiness pursued in meditation. It

could be attempting to undermine the classical philosophical distinction of subject and object; who is watching whom? Who is the watcher and who is being watched? And what of this is reflected in the eyes and minds of a third party, the audience? Was it a hymn of praise to technology, or was it criticism?

The Buddha remained silent. And in the meantime meditated quietly, and the gaze remained turned inwards even when on this Friday, the thirteenth, he did not become the centre of attention. That moment, one might imagine, was a veritable moment of enlightenment, precisely in that the light didn't go on and what had been planned for a large audience was seen by none. Silence is not the absence of sound, but the lack of sound where one might expect it, or might have just heard it, or expect one might hear it again in a moment. Emptiness is staying away from everyone at the opening, totally zen, Totally zen, like the legendary clapping of one hand.

Seen in this light, it seemed for a moment that even corona could not make art insignificant. However, this would be a very optimistic conclusion, because, in the meantime, audiences, museums, and, just as dismaying, the artists, have been duped. Anyone who wants to see or hear or experience art now has to content themselves with mere digital versions – a situation that perhaps attests to the predictive power of *TV Buddha*. Whatever the case, for those for whom art, theatre and music mean something important, this is a catastrophic time.

Yet it is fair to ask how disastrous this situation really is when people are diligently looking for medicine, hospital beds, means of livelihood, work, school, exercise and fresh air. Is now the time to moan about the lack of art? We have literature, and further, isn't art that which contributes something to our existence once we have that existence in order – a situation which unfortunately is not the case now? Shouldn't the arts wait on the reserve bench for a while until society is somewhat back in running order?

I don't know. Even if we could decide, there isn't one direct solution to all the current problems we face and we are not sure about whether we can accept all the stopgap solutions we are presented with. This is precisely where art might play a role. I don't mean that the creativity of the artist should propose solutions to our pressing problems, because these will really have to come from sensible administrations and experts. I mean that art can be helpful because through art we learn how to deal with things we do not well understand. Artworks train us to live with ambiguities, to suspend judgements, and to derive meaning from unclear situations.

Something has changed in art since the Romantic period when artists no longer felt obliged to follow the existing rules and began to propose their own rules. Mozart composed on commission, but Beethoven only when he was touched by inspiration. The same was true for painters, look at how William Blake suddenly broke loose in a series of visionary drawings full of texts from the Beyond. The poets followed suit, all setting their own rules, leaving the reader, listener or audience to try to fathom those rules before he or she could make anything out of their art. The classical ideal of beauty had been shattered. From then on, art became experimental and would remain so through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until the present day. This enormous freedom was both a blessing for the artist, who could now explore in any direction, and a curse, precisely because now everything became possible and therefore threatened to become arbitrary. The same was true for the public: the wealth of possibilities increased, but also a new task arose, that of attributing meanings to things which emerge from obscurity without a clear set of rules. And even though the avant-garde put out magazines and pamphlets to explain what was at stake, and even though art criticism flourished, from this time on, the public was more or less left to its own devices.

The French philosopher Roland Barthes would later on explain this situation in a new way. In his 1967 book of the same

name, he described the death of the author, with the famous phrase: 'The birth of the reader must be paid for with the death of the author'. In other words, the author's intentions or biography is irrelevant; once the work is completed, it is all about interpreting it (and the same goes for enjoying, experiencing, discussing, visiting, reading, listening).

Here lurks not only the pleasure, but also the meaning of art. The artist does one half of the work, then the other must take over. This is why art is always ambiguous: one doesn't read what one reads because it doesn't say what it says. One sees a Buddha in front of a TV set, but it is (also) something else. It is up to us to think of what.

Many people feel embarrassed because they think they don't understand a work of art or because they don't like it. But art is not a riddle with a solution, no interpretation is wrong. And they don't have to like it; it can also intrigue, provoke, make them laugh or make them think. What matters is that we are asked to give meaning in an uninhibited way to what we don't or can't quite understand.

That is exactly what is asked of us in these times. The coronavirus is not a work of art, nor are the catastrophes that result from it. But although, understandably, we are always so desperate for more clarity and certainty, those who can relativize their annoyance about ambiguity and insecurity may be better off. And here the arts can help, by giving us practice in offering alternative interpretations, narratives or perspectives, and providing space for those feelings.

In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, we can enjoy reading how all kinds of individuals experience the world in their own ways, without us needing to have any understanding or experience of troop movements. Or in Samuel Beckett's great *Endgame* one can experience the extreme absurdity of existence through the scene in which Hamm, who can't walk, harasses his servant Clov, who can't sit down, while his parents occasionally stick their heads out of a garbage can and make things worse.

Even non-believers can also undergo indescribable religious experiences of suffering and loss through Bach's *Johannes Passion*, just as others may with Beyoncé.

What matters is that the arts have a lot to offer us here, not only as comfort or distraction, but also as providing practice in dealing with all the new uncertainties, like the one hand clapping.





## **The shared experience anno corona**

Basje Boer

The last time I went to the cinema was on Wednesday the 11th of March, the day before the first Coronavirus measures were announced. It was quiet in the hall of the Pathé De Munt in Amsterdam. As usual, I sat at the front, uncomfortably close to the screen. Once the film had started, people began entering the hall. Every time the door opened, a rectangle of corridor light fell on the screen, and I sighed demonstratively.

On Twitter, film lovers are already looking back with melancholy on the days they spent in the cinema. In response to a request, people share their favourite movie theatre memories. I see one anecdote after another about the time the twitterer in question had the cinema to himself. The snapshots of empty theatres that sometimes accompany these tweets confuse me — I associate emptiness with this crisis, not with the period before.

The film I visited that Wednesday afternoon at the Pathé De Munt was *The Invisible Man*, a nice dime-a-dozen horror film about a woman who is first locked up in her house by her manipulative husband and later must suffer an invisible tormentor (that same husband). Looking back, the story, clearly made to connect to #MeToo sentiment, can easily slide into a corona-analogy, just as every fiction and every work of art suddenly allows itself to be loaded with a different meaning, with extra weight, to be viewed from a new perspective, seen with new eyes.

Give an artist a crisis and he resorts to metaphors.

My own favourite cinema memory is of another horror film, *Drag Me to Hell*. This memory also takes place at De Munt. The auditorium was packed, noisy. I couldn't relax. All around me was unrestrained chattering, the scrolling of phones, the crunching of chips and popcorn. It took ten minutes until the film, which is exciting but above all disgusting and funny, finally caught hold of the audience. As divided as everyone had been, on their own little island and full of their own experiences, we became one after the first rancid scene. We laughed as one,

disgusted as one, were one scream, one emotion and one tense body that braced itself for the next shock.

Everything stands still, they say. Everything goes fast, I think. How long did it take before we became nostalgic for the world before the crisis? How long did it take for the melancholy *memes* to take over Twitter? How long it take to come up with all the metaphors?

Companies pour the spirit of the times into smooth emocommercials with more or less the same message: we are alone, in our separate homes, on those separate islands — and yet we are together. We are together in our solidarity, in our shared destiny, and we are together because we are in touch more than ever. Because: zoomparties! Home schooling! Virtual fitness classes! Online meetings! Online *raves*! Online Easter! On the internet we are more social than ever.

I've noticed it myself. I mail more and more often. My mails are longer and more personal. With people I used to speak only superficially, I suddenly maintain intense contact. On the rare moments I go out of the door, I regularly stop at the mailbox. I send presents and tickets. I write letters. But all that calling and writing and messaging is a very specific kind of social contact.

It's communication.

Everything happens fast.

My panic gave way to gloom, the gloom gave way to a sudden burst of creative drive. I was puzzled. The cultural pieces I was going to write during the coming period — about cinema films, the Song Contest — had of course been scrapped; what alternatives could I think of? I mailed my editor an idea, and after she had expressed her doubts, I mailed her another one. I felt so inventive and smart, so incredibly flexible — until I realised that this editor was being bombarded with ideas for pieces, just as any editorial staff of any magazine is probably being bombarded with ideas for pieces at the moment.

We're just taking care, they say. We'll make a sprint, I think.

The contortions through which providers, platforms, institutions and media dedicated to culture are twisting themselves can be seen as sympathetic, as desperate, as a stretch, as charming or constricted, a little breathless, clumsy, feverish, even strangely excited. Inspired by the need to remain relevant, they strive to please the audience, to keep the attention, not to be forgotten.

Give the creative sector a crisis and it comes up with... well, with creative solutions. The creative sector wouldn't be the creative sector if it weren't inventive and agile, if it couldn't respond to the zeitgeist at lightning speed. But is this impressive inventiveness simply a reflex? And shouldn't we look beyond the reflex? Taking care is a luxury that the cultural sector cannot afford. Standing still and reflecting is not something you do when you panic. You need a foundation, and that foundation is missing.

Do you know which foundation you can build on? On subsidies.

On social media I scroll past concerts, performed live or not. I scroll past podcasts, playlists and online culture tips, stories that have been written at a rapid pace. Films, with or without introduction, Q&A or the possibility to watch them together. In theory, we consume as much culture during *anno corona* as *pre-corona*, only now online instead of in the flesh. Virtually we walk through exhibitions, sit in the audience at theatre performances that took place before the crisis or are now being performed, in front of the empty seats at the opera.

Without a rectangle of corridor light falling on the canvas. Without anyone talking over or standing pontifically in front of an artwork. Without the crunching of chips and popcorn. Is the solitary art experience the ultimate art experience? The *black box* of the cinema forces you to focus. It forces you to surrender.

The *white cube* of the museum or gallery makes you self-conscious. Sharpens your senses.

When my aunt's husband died, my mother wanted to do something for her sister. Tradition prescribes visits with uncomfortable silences and cake, but my mother disregards tradition, so she found an alternative. Every week, my aunt, together with a group of older women, cleans the church of which they all are members. My mother, who is not religious at all and has an aversion to anything bourgeois, offered to help her.

The image stayed with me. It moved me. That group of women, over sixty or, lets say elderly, silently working together. The light falling through the high windows is captured by the swirling dust. A ritual that replaces the discomfort of language, of communication. A being together that has nothing to do with speaking or touching, and everything with a shared goal, a shared experience, with physical closeness.

Art is not only the expression of an artist. Making and experiencing art is also part of something social — of a ritual.

Laughter as one, disgust as one, one scream, one emotion.

When we finally really take care, when we can afford to pause and reflect on what culture is and what it means, let's use that space to place culture in a broader context. To really take a step back. To really look. Let's look beyond supply and demand, beyond economic value, beyond marketing. Lets see culture more precisely as *culture*. Not as something we make as individuals and that we consume as individuals, but as something that binds us together, as a way to be together. As a ritual. A shared experience.



**By touch**

Dries Verhoeven



Bianca Bondi, **The private lives of non-human entities**, Het HEM, 2019.  
Foto: Cassander Eeftinck Schattenkerk © Het HEM.

We have entered a collective state of uncertainty in recent weeks. In the aisles of the supermarket we apologize as we uncomfortably try to keep out of each other's way, unsure whether we are overdoing it or not being careful enough. Is it still ok to visit one's parents, and if so, should we wear a mask? We are constantly second guessing ourselves.

Questions also begin to nag us on a more existential level. The paradigm of economic growth is finally waning, but (fuck!) what does that mean for all the people who are now going to lose their jobs?

We say we need to start thinking about globalization, but before you know it, the efforts to curb the virus fuel the rise of new nationalism. It was always easy for us to express our opinion on Primark and fast fashion, but what do we, cosmopolitan artists, now think about our presentations abroad? Weren't they 'important for international exchange'? Or was that only an

empty claim in a funding application? In the meantime our flight shame shifts into high gear.

As with a cane for the blind, we are all moving by touch through an unknown landscape, whispering to each other about what we discover. The status quo is languorous. In short: we live in interesting times (provided you still have enough money to pay the rent and are not lying in the ICU with pneumonia). My blood, I notice, is pumping.

Now, I have a predilection for doubt. A hesitant person who thoughtfully tries to relate to her surroundings is a more interesting character (and a better friend) than a self-assured talk show guest.

But over the past decade such a person became the exception to the rule. She found it difficult to fit into the neoliberal mould. She didn't go on social media, or when she did, she was indecisive about what she should or shouldn't post. She was less resolute than she was supposed to be.

In the art field as well, the expression of doubt was replaced with resolve and pride. After the traumatic budget cuts in the arts and stirred up social cynicism, a landscape of 'renewed self-confidence', as the media put it, revealed itself.

Artists and curators became skilled in expressing, lauding and defending their right to exist. Blockbusters were promoted in superlatives, and tourists flocked in. Theatre makers began citing their five star reviews. The academies began to teach how to present oneself to the world through a good website. I paid someone to maintain my Instagram account.

The modest auditorium behind the Stedelijk Museum became a shiny 'bathtub' run by an art manager. The Amsterdam *Stadsschouwburg* (city theatre) became ITA and thereby just as cosmopolitan as its director. Posters were replaced by LED screens.

And as it happens with all spaces of splendour, the art world was also more carefully preened. There was less tolerance for contentious opinions and thorns in the flesh. The subversive and

the attractive are difficult to reconcile anyway; in a glamorous world, a provocation can quickly become a gimmick.

Our moral thinking itself was buffed up. Institutions not only became (rightly) more inclusive, but began to congratulate themselves for it. They tumbled over each other in the expression of social virtue. I heard an authority in the art world proclaim that there was no room for artists who didn't strive for good. This confused me; if 'good conduct' becomes a precondition, the senseless, the foolish, the dark disappears.

In the visual arts there was also another development: the speaking artist was born. Following the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the artist began to give *keynote lectures*. Occasionally she would speak out unequivocally about social issues and the position her work took in that regard. The jargon was impressive, the ideological position usually less surprising. I doubt if the lectures had any effect on the behaviour of the audience. Rather, the artist's cleverness was reflected back on herself, as in an infinite palace of mirrors.

It seemed as if the landscape of the arts was now transforming into something between leisure industry and moral instruction, actually something quite similar to my Facebook timeline: entertainment, thumbs up and social positioning.

Our thinking was clear and beautiful.

Now we find it hard to stand still. Art institutions have closed their doors but they do their best on social media to remind us of their existence. (Follow us online! Share our event!) It feels forced and already outdated, a reminder of the pre-corona era when *likeability* and *visibility* still mattered. The internet these days mainly shows its powerlessness; so far I haven't been able to attend a transcendental experience online. Yesterday I paid a virtual visit to the MoMA: it felt like a walk in the woods via Google Street View. Don't bother. And if I consider the analogy a bit longer: the woods never suggested me to *like* them. If no people are there, it will patiently wait for them to return.

This is how I imagine the art institution of the future, as a space that stoically and patiently waits for us. Let's imagine that in the coming years only a small number of visitors will be allowed in those institutions, so few that the marketing department can be disbanded. We won't cite reviews anymore, the LED screens will be removed. The public should be deterred rather than seduced, success becomes a problem. Tourists stay away in droves anyway, international art transport becomes unaffordable. If you are interested in a bonus, you won't become a museum director. Damien Hirst is working at a food bank.

Let's imagine it will take a while before we can adequately interpret this period. Let every socially critical artist, every trend watcher hold their breath. No TED-Talks.

And then, one day the Stedelijk opens a door, the one on Van Baerlestraat, between the 'bathtub' and the old building. Not many people see it. I walk in. There's paper on the floor. The escalator doesn't work anymore. Here and there the lacquer has peeled off the wall. In one room I see a few works which, stammering and stuttering, don't manage to express themselves properly. In a corner there is an unexceptional bucket. (It reminds me of the Verbeke Foundation in Kemzeke, Belgium, where you never knew whether you were looking at the art or at some tools someone left behind.) In the next room a work screams at me, not in sentences, but rather as someone with Tourette's syndrome. Rather than inviting me to linger there, the work seems to want me to piss off. There is no apologetic text panel next to it.

Meanwhile in the Stadsschouwburg (formerly ITA) twelve people are scattered throughout the hall. For an hour now a feverish man has been lying on the stage grieving, as Artaud once described in *The Theatre of Cruelty*. It is unclear whether the man is ill, whether the disease is real. What the director wants to tell us is unclear, instinct wins over reason. After a while the man leaves the stage, he lacks the energy to receive flowers.

I suddenly recall an experience I had not so long ago at the HEM in Zaandam, at Maarten Spruyt's exhibition in the former shooting gallery. Visitors were allowed in individually and very cautiously, like at the Albert Heijn these days. The collection of works offered a vague vision of a time after the Anthropocene. Nature appeared to have taken over. In retrospect: were those breathing objects viruses? With my (human) meaning-apparatus, I was unable to comprehend. I felt uncomfortable and happy. It turned out to be a prophetic exhibition.

As I am writing this, a cat walks through the apartment. She comes from our downstairs neighbors and has been meowing at the door regularly since we began our quarantine. Curiously she walks through the room, she doesn't know this place yet. Cautiously she jumps onto this desk, to the right of my keyboard.

Let's be that cat.





## **Indeterminate time**

Babara Visser

*Art is what makes life more interesting than art.*

Artist Robert Filliou said it just right. When I'm professionally in despair – and that's quite often – I think about this statement. But does this wisdom still apply?

► AMSTERDAM, DAY 19

Just as you can print money when there is too little of it, or even put a new currency into circulation, so you can start a new era when the circumstances are right. I write this so many days into the new calendar. From day 1, it's been quiet on the street, and in the sky, with the sun constantly shining. Private and professional life flow into each other even more than usual. The work that does goes on, does so without our bodies. The head alone is enough.

In old cartoons the prisoner counts the days by making marks on the wall of his cell. A personal timeline, one that begins and ends when the sentence is served. Our new calendar is both indeterminate, and fixed in time and space. It is everywhere, but in a different phase in each place: in Brabant they are somewhere else than in the Randstad, and in Asia they are months ahead of us. Almost everyone is forced to stay home. When everyone is in the same situation, it is no longer a punishment, its just reality.

► DAY 14

On the granite staircase in front of our house is a circular saw, and on the steps a pile of wide planks. Through the window I see three people in their twenties gluing the planks together into a panel. Two of them are struggling with the material, one of them makes a vain attempt to use paper towel to clean up drops of wood glue that have dripped out onto the street. They try to clamp the boards together, but this is apparently difficult. They

stop to consult each other. Then they talk and laugh. About themselves, about each other or about the situation itself. In times of crisis, tinkering around trying to build something together rarely leads to a quarrel.

On this windless spring evening, most of us are obliged to sit inside. We netflix. A verb that expresses how one shifts like a sack of potatoes from from couch to bed and back again for weeks on end.

Sick of their screens, a lot of people have taken to clipping, pasting, crocheting and baking. Clay? Sold out everywhere. Kneading dough and spinning wool have become the sensual placebos of the single person. More ambitious projects move to the sidewalk. There's more space there, and more importantly there's more time. For a while I stare at the neighbours tinkering away, and worry about work drying up. Luckily I still teach virtually at the academy in Eindhoven. There's a department there, which, without knowing it, has been preparing for this kind of situation for twenty years. The course is called '*Man and Leisure*'. Man and Leisure. From now on, the school can proceed as *The Man and Leisure Academy*.

From my room I can see the three neighbours in front of the door with man-sized wooden panels. A boy next door stops right in front of my window and asks the group: 'What are you making?' The hammering stops, and it's quiet for a while. Then one of them, just out of sight says, 'A box. We're making a box.' The little boy turns around and yells 'Mom! They're making a box!' as he runs home. 'Oh, okay.' I hear his mother say just before the front door closes.

Life goes on, but without moving one's body much, because that is not allowed.

But it's still possible.

Against all recommendations, I want to drive to see Iris Marie in Leipzig. The emergency supersedes the law. Iris Marie is my child. The studies she started? Poof! Gone. The pizzeria where

she worked? Bang! Closed. The boyfriend she had? Dude! Get out. I'll take her to Amsterdam and make her a child again. Things that always seemed to go one way – forward – turns out, against all odds, pretty easy to reverse, so why not now?

As I walk out the front door, the neighbours apologise for the Workmate blocking the sidewalk. I kick the sawdust off my shoes as I get into the car.

*I shouldn't but I can.* At least as far as the German border. I justify my behaviour by repeating to myself that the *emergency supersedes the law*. Then on Day 15, I am driving on an abandoned German Autobahn to Leipzig. Not at the promised 260 kilometres per hour inscribed on my ex's dashboard, but I drive fast. I see on the speedometer, there is no difference between 80 and 180 when there are no other cars on the road. Relaxed, in *cruise control*, I imagine what it would be like to be the last motorist on earth. Yeah, that's what I am right now! But it doesn't work, my imagination is too weak.

It's getting busier online now. I'm starting a trimester class from Leipzig with a new group of 'Eindhoven' students, whom I might never meet in real life. They have in theory started a Masters in Contextual Design. In practice it's a group conversation via Gyro Gearloose's videophone. Suddenly I begin to notice that what technically is possible, may not really be appropriate biologically.

The students are simultaneously in the Korean night, a sunny Viennese mansion and on a *cattle farm* in Indiana at dawn.

The situation itself is more Contextual Design than one can imagine as a teacher, but to keep up credibility I still give the students an assignment. Wherever they are, they are all stuck somewhere.

It must be a frightening reality for these children, who are used to taking a plane as if it were a tram, to indefinitely not be able to go anywhere. When asked about this, it turns out that

as *digital natives* they are hardly bothered. Physical or virtual, there is no clear distinction for them.

At the beginning of the lesson I emphasised that there are no 'good' or 'bad' circumstances for a Contextual Designer. The conditions you encounter, including all the seemingly undesirable details, are your starting point. Their playing field, however limited, is full of possibilities, be it an anti-squatting room in a former office in Woensel-west, the oppression of the parental home in rural Austria or a locked hospital room. Being reflected back on yourself, that's where the challenge lies. A big story can happen right in front of your nose, if you let yourself see it.

As homework they were assigned to read *Voyage autour de ma chambre* by Xavier de Maistre, which can be found online in an English translation from 1871. Apart from being a feast of associations activated by the objects in a room, the historical book is also a healthy relativisation: there's nothing new under the sun. Psychologically, we are still the same wretches as in 1794. Yet there is a big difference. The mere fact that the text of this book, as well as entire libraries, video libraries, blogs and vlogs, are all within reach at the touch of a button changes a lot, if not everything.

When I asked the students what they would do in this situation without Wifi, they went quiet – and stayed quiet. Not because they didn't know what they would do, but because they couldn't imagine such a situation at all. For them Wifi is not a service or even a right, but a natural phenomenon, like the sun.

Shortly after Trump had labelled '*China*' as the villain on television, Chinese student C. noticed that the people on the streets of Eindhoven were suddenly hostile towards her. From one day to the next she was seen as a threat. Because she could not leave, she decided to make the best of it. She worked for days on a representation of the virus in the form of a Carnival

suit, put it on and intervened in the festivities. Many people got infected there *aerosolising* the virus with their shouting.

C. herself, of course, didn't suffer. For me she had already earned her grade for the whole trimester, but we still had two months to go.

H. from Taiwan managed to get home on one of the last flights. With only one other passenger she flew in the last Boeing 747 from Europe to Asia. That was an historic event in itself, because, irrespective of any crisis, the era of the 747 is over.

Once in Taiwan, her two weeks of strict quarantine followed – she complained via Skype of suffering having to speak to Uber Eats three times a day. A final mandatory test would show that she was virus-free. In the nearest clinic they took some blood and X-rayed her lungs – a formality, she thought. But the doctor didn't like what they saw in the picture. Without further explanation she was locked in a room with only a bed, a toilet and a crackling intercom. She's still there. A surveillance camera observes her day and night. Totally in shock and shrouded in a blue hospital shirt I could see her through the videophone yesterday. Taiwan wasn't normally like China, she cried, this couldn't be true! She is trapped there, out of luck, and it is unclear for how long. The latter condition applies to everyone, but being able to choose where you are trapped affords a certain feeling of freedom.

I try to help her get some distance from the situation through the professional perspective. The smartphone makes it possible for her to write, film, photograph, record sound, look up information – the tools are not lacking. The most important thing is to imagine what she wants to do. The question is whether the fear allows this. The urge to make things does not arise because we want to kill time, but because we want to give time meaning.

► DAY 18

Back in the Netherlands. The population of Amsterdam has been halved. Not because of the plague but because the tourists have evaporated. Everyone prefers to be sick in their own country, except my child. And she's right, the beds here are almost gone.

Only the locals live here now. That's why every day I think of the Car Free Sundays from 1973 - when tourists only came to the Leidseplein and it was always nice weather, just like now. The city now resembles the old days, when it wasn't better but dirtier, more fun, with free parking. In the meantime, the millions of roving tourists have polished the historic city centre smooth. What has remained is a sterile decor that hasn't aged but even looks younger and younger as the decades pass. Botox Town.

► DAY 18

No more tinkering in front of our house. There are flowers on the neighbours' doorstep, and *the box* is, just as I arrive, lifted outside by its makers, together with some older people, maybe family members. Pete, our neighbour, is dead.

That we're living in interesting times is a fact. Robert Fil-liou's statement is still valid, but the opposite is also true:

*Life is what makes art more interesting than life*

Well noted.

Amsterdam, Dag 36



**The adventures of some of my friends and acquaintances and  
friends and acquaintances of my friends and acquaintances  
and friends and acquaintances of... (...) ...my friends and ac-  
quaintances in the twenty-first century**  
Samuel Vriezen

'If this lockdown continues for a few more weeks, I can play games every day,' Eric says. We've known each other since elementary school. We still meet regularly with other friends from back in the day to play the some of the better specialty board games. A few weeks ago, our arena shifted from Eric's workspace to Table Top Simulator, an online platform that mimics tables filled with all kinds of game boards and pieces (and at the end of a game, the winner can flip the virtual table over).

Eric and his brother are the directors of a small printing house that has been in the family for over a century. This industry is going through tough times anyway, still, in recent decades, with great inventiveness, they were always able to regain their place in an increasingly difficult market. Even now there are still enough orders to keep running. But these are supposed to be the months which get them through the rest of the year, and it's going to be difficult. Undoubtedly, the company is not the only family-run business facing dramatic cash flow problems.

Many of my Amsterdam friends are freelance performing artists. They're not going to have any work during the coming months. I see people on Facebook wondering anxiously how to pay the rent. If that question is so general, I think it's a small step to questions about why you still have to pay the rent.

The first friends and acquaintances of friends and acquaintances, i.e. the first people in my environment, so to speak, who I hear have the virus are people in the homeless shelter, people who'd wish they had a rent to worry about. Not to mention how their economic condition, in a broad sense, their housekeeping, how they get through the day, make use of space, stay alive, get completely shaken up in the one-point-five-meter society.

All that is solid melts into air and people are at last compelled to face with sober senses their real conditions of life, and their

relations with their kind. What is art supposed to do here? Imagine other worlds yet again? Maybe not for a while. Save all that for when everyone begins shouting that another world is 'unrealistic'. But now, with this final launch of the twenty-first century, it is the other world that is clawing its way towards us. It takes the initiative. Then let art do what else it can do: perceive and make that becoming world visible. Be the sober senses for the people.

## 2

'Community art, uhh, so how?' says Elke, a friend who makes political art and who I remember from Occupy. We talk over the phone about the meter and a half. *Community art* has always been a magic expression signifying social relevance. Governments love to see artists create harmony, and Elke was just invited to a project somewhere this summer, but what is a community if you can't even hold on to each other?

She has a lot of contact with people from the action group for undocumented people, We Are Here; some of whom are now in the homeless shelter, and so it was through Elke that I heard about the infections there. Recently she was in Cairo with Wouter, with whom she did a community art project ten years ago. This time, they had been in Cairo to more or less complete that earlier project in the politically much more impossible circumstances of today's Egypt. But this objective was thwarted by the fact that they both became ill. COVID-19? Not sure, but the symptoms were there. Wouter could have brought it with him from Germany. But it will reign in Cairo anyway. There are no reliable figures on that. The Egyptian government doesn't think it's chic to keep proper track of such things. However, the Sudanese with whom Elke works here in the Netherlands do know: in Egypt, the disease is raging! They know that through the grapevine, apparently many people in Sudan return sick from the North. It seems that the Sudanese with their informal

networks do not have a less reliable picture of the situation than Egyptians or international organizations that only have vague statistics and official news. Your State can only be so absolute, it can never be everything.

Start the 'sober sensing' with your own, direct practice; notice how the world responds to it.

I tell Elke about a session with the Master composition students at the Royal Conservatoire. They're all at home now and can't organize concerts. I had asked if this would change their perception of music. No-one had an immediate answer. According to my fellow teacher Peter, students who are relying on commissions from ensembles or orchestras are like lost souls. Other students adapt more easily and find work online for example. Arie, a student, said he was now only sending out scores for solo instruments - great idea.

And Elke, in turn, says she's been zooming in more and more over the last few years anyway. She had chosen not to have to move around too much for her work but rather to make a longer term commitment to fewer people and places. Small networks, but scattered all over the world.

### 3

We, the frail  
stuck in our houses  
check the news  
to no avail.

For weeks I have been sharing with my friends and acquaintances and the friends and acquaintances of my friends and acquaintances and... insights on Facebook. I drop my resistance and just share, analyze and write. We all lag behind what's happening, every insight is constantly adjusted. There is an irreducible interval between what we say and what happens in the real world,

but the professional experts also have to deal with that, so it's not so embarrassing.

Apparently Lisanne, who I know from our time at the editorial board of *Stichting Perdu* and who is now editor of the Dutch Review of Books, gets my drift and asks me if I wouldn't want to write an article – needn't be the definitive corona article, it can be a hot take – about the politics of corona? I don't know why I would know anything about that, but if I think about it for a day I don't know why I would know less about it than anyone else, so I agree.

I consider the proper form, start writing, and see myself integrating numerous analyses and opinions, scientific and philosophical insights into one essay. Nothing of what I write comes across as particularly new to me. No breakthroughs. But the form works, the piece goes in all directions but remains a whole, I cleverly braid the motifs, make connections, and when I'm finished, to my amazement, I recognize in it a typical Samuel piece. For example, if I replaced 'coronavirus' by 'poetry' and 'logistics' by 'internet' throughout the piece, it would fit seamlessly into my book of essays *Netwerk in eclipses*. It is as if I had blogged and theorized about poetry for over a decade just to prepare for this pandemic. And once published, to my surprise, the article is shared at least a hundred times. (Is that actually a lot? For me it is. No essay of mine on poetic debate and experimental literature on the internet has ever been shared a hundred times).

The piece argues for 'new conjunctions between distance and connection', connection with the unknown. I'm slightly surprised that it's a lot about logistics, but that's what everything is about during the pandemic: from the availability of tests, masks and hospital equipment to the toilet paper on supermarket shelves.

About ten years ago we also experienced a systemic crisis, the credit crisis leading to Indignados and Occupy. At that time the problem was more abstract, it was about financial instruments

and institutions. Now it's about travelling, transporting medical goods, going to work. This time it hits Main Street before it hits Wall Street. I want to know more about logistics and call Patrick, who has a lot of experience with production processes in the book world and in catering, and is also one of my old board game friends. Our conversations have always been about systems, about game mechanics, about model techniques, about what kind of worlds, choices and stories these render possible. He explains the thinking behind *Just In Time* and *Six Sigma* production processes: maximally reliable, minimally redundant supply chains that ensure your car is delivered exactly when you need it, so there's no need to keep unnecessary stock anywhere. Everything is optimised for a world where everything is optimised. And there are certainly techniques for dealing with the inevitable contingencies within any particular supply chain. But the system as a whole? No company or agency has the complete overview, and in a crisis strange systemic effects can arise.

Patrick gives the example of a hypothetical company that supplies hospital equipment, but only generates 10% from its sales to hospitals, and 90% from the consumer market. If the consumer market then collapses and the company goes bankrupt, hospitals suddenly have no supplies. Everything is interwoven in this way, and you can count on almost every profession sooner or later being declared an essential profession.

These supply chains are the rationally perfect form of a completely irrational assumption: that finely tuned material flows can always continue to run. If that is so, and all the points in the chains are flexible enough to accommodate contingencies, you can almost completely reduce annoying factors such as production errors, time intervals and distances. As long as everything in a system fits perfectly, it works at infinite speed. That's why we live in a world that leaves no time or place for anything and imposes the demand of infinite agility on everyone. But if, for example, a pandemic everywhere introduces the need

for distance in the connection or for a delay in time, then that world can crash.

#### 4

Christiaan contacts me to see if I would like to contribute an essay to a series on the role of art in times when the virus changes everything. The essay I'm typing right now – despite reservations about the possibilities of art, I accept the commission. Christiaan himself launched the series, with co-author Akiem. A line in their text is an important trope of 20th century experimental art: the abolition of the separation between art and life.

A remark about – well he's a friend of a friend of a friend so I'll call him Marcel – excites me: 'Duchamp sees the implicit creative dimension in man'. Here my doubts get focus and I also see a way out. I see Marcel differently. Not as someone who wanted to celebrate creativity in everyday life, but as someone who cultivated indifference as an aesthetic attitude, who had to do this precisely to protect life, more specifically, desire, from art.

His work consists almost entirely of feints, puzzles and secrets. The sophisticated indifference evoked by a coal shovel or a comb focuses the aesthetic sense on almost nothing in such a way that every liberating expression, every chance for a sublime experience, is definitively kept at a distance, thus unaffected, thus preserved.

For the last twenty years of his life he worked in secret on an installation, *Étants Donnés*, in which (((traditionally) male) sexual) desire is central, but in such a way that everything revolves around distance. Only through a peephole in a doorway can one see a hyper-realistic idyllic landscape, and within it, peek right between the legs of an unreal woman. It is a complex, dark, disturbing work, which is precisely about untouchability, about absolute and frozen desire, more than about creativity in daily

life. But perhaps that is precisely why Duchamp, the master of distance and the deferral of touch, is the ice-cold artist for the time of COVID-19.

Should there be doors with peepholes in the supply chains?

The real artist behind Marcel's *Fountain* is probably a friend of his, the poet Elsa, whose poetic work has intrigued me for a long time. Dagmar, editor at Stichting Perdu, organized an evening about her work. I've known Dagmar for five years, since *This Progress*, one of Tino's installation/performances during his retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, a work where life and art appear to coincide. We were hired there as freelance workers supposed to have 'real' conversations with the public as we walked through a programmed sequence with them, an artistic production chain with Just-In-Time precision. Rarely did the conversations I had feel unforced.

Now Dagmar asks me to contribute to the evening about Elsa and I'm looking forward to that. I translate the overwhelming long poem *Mineself – Minesoul – And – Mine – Cast-Iron Lover*, a tirade about a thwarted desire to touch. The poem screams and rages and demands sensuality like a birthright, to put an end to the cast-iron lover's unbearable detachment.

However, once the evening came that I was to present the translation, all cultural events were cancelled. Instead, I read it to an audience hidden behind screens. This is how we try to preserve the desire. When Dagmar asks me about the chat afterwards, how it felt, after such an intense recitation, I notice that it was heavy. There was no audience present, not even a producer, and nevertheless I addressed the reading as if to someone there, investing myself physically, but without feeling anything physical coming back in return. Though there are thumbs and hearts, signs that something has been experienced behind the scenes, the tension lingers around me.

## 5

The art world needs to be supported, but our minister does not get any further than offering extra support for 'important cultural institutions'. What individual artists may expect from the state, in order to keep their practices afloat, remains obscure. A trifling short-lived stipend, that's about it. The pandemic is like the neutron bomb: art itself is dying, but hurray for the important institutions, they remain standing!

Pavlos, Facebook friend and pianist, refuses all invitations for online performances if he is not paid for them. He's worried: if this new mode of online concert (nice and flexible and cheap) becomes the new normal, shouldn't we make it normal to have to pay for such performances? Pavlos lives in France and not in the Netherlands, where pianists playing new music already rarely count on earning any money for recitals. Whoever can play the piano is not alone. Playing the piano with ten fingers is octopus thinking anyway. Under lockdown I myself take the time to rehearse Frédéric's four *Ballads*. In every loop and every seemingly simple accompaniment figure I discover new voices incessantly, and as I hear more of them, I start to play lighter and lighter. These ballads are exciting and sexy but at the same time they are fragile tissues, vibrant communities that live only, briefly, under your hands.

I'm very lucky to have more exceptionally good pianists among my friends. Keiko, who plays pianoforte and modern piano and who is as much at home in Ludwig's work as in Galina's, occasionally records short clips these days. Federico, Komitas, Erik. Pieces from half a minute to three minutes long. They are always surprising, fresh and vital sounding recordings, made spontaneously, always in one take. She comes to bring me her latest CD (music by Erik) and we drink tea, one and a half meters away from each other.

'Why should you always do your best to make the perfect recording?' she says. Indeed, this seems like an idea from an earlier era of the music industry. I mean, when money was still being made there. Making a spontaneous recording, one that works, may not be perfect, but is alive, is perhaps more the music of our time and circumstances. Rather than statements, signs of life: I'm still here, the music's still here, are you still here?

Dante, pianist and composer with whom I have worked a lot, has been playing a short recital every Saturday since the beginning of the 'intelligent lockdown'. He used to write about political issues on social media, I haven't seen him post a single word about the pandemic. I realize that this is very conscious. His recitals are what he has to say about, or in reaction to, the disease. Every Saturday I attend his concerts through the imperfect medium of my iPhone. I see him play, as if it were a concert he might have played, only a month ago, anywhere in the world in small halls, but today from his living room. In this setting, the pieces reflect on the pandemic situation.

The first recital ends with Eriks *Désespoir agréable* which seems to me a nice description of the lockdown. At least, for those who have a roof over their heads. Otherwise the first part of the second recital might be applicable: Darya's *there is no place for me on this map*, a static and meditative piece, with an unimaginably noisy *field recording* of urban life that rages through it. A superposition of the daily economy from 'normal' times, and a silent core – but it is as if in pandemic times the meaning of this combination is reversed, and the stasis disturbs the raging just as much as vice versa. In the fourth recital Dante plays a piece by Eva-Maria called *lose verbunden*, and that's how I feel, and that's how the recital feels, and that's how listening via a Facebook watch party feels. Dante plays work by friends, they are scattered, confined everywhere in their houses, behind the scenes, loosely connected.

In this recital he also plays my piece *Linking*, a card game in which player(s) have to connect motifs on cards according to rules I thought up. And while listening, it penetrates me, as if for the first time, how fragile my own work is, how much it is about probing, about searching for a connection that is never given just like that. Somehow it is important that this happens live. Or semi-live: the Facebook interface builds in small delays, sometimes you can even 'rewind', you can certainly see the performance again afterwards. But I know that the probing happens exactly then and there, in a house like mine, with a friend and his family in it who are also, just like me, keeping their distance.

The students I supervise through their master's research at the conservatory have had their year-end festival cancelled. But there is one force of nature stronger than the virus, and that is the composition student. Danya investigates what he calls 'temporal authorities' in music, and what happens when you have to change from one way of feeling (counting, measuring) to another within one piece. We have a tutoring session, and I clearly don't have to tell him that the pandemic situation is exactly what his work is about.

Danya had been counting on being able to present a piece about the paradoxes of an ensemble that tries maintain unison with music boxes slowly played by hand. This recital will not happen - now he has to realize an online version. We are talking about which technique to use for this. Is ensemble playing, as it is taught in academic classical music practice these days, really possible using a medium that first has to send the signal around the earth and thus always inserts perceptible delays? Inevitably this condition will become part of the new version of the piece.

Then comes the date of the festival. I join the live stream. First I hear a beautiful piece by Eva, which directly incorporates current events. A quartet of streaming musicians responds to key words from the 'historical speech' Mark gave to the Dutch-

men - so there's still some beautiful music coming out of that man who once wanted to become a pianist! In Danya's piece I see an ensemble, everyone in their own window, streamed from living rooms from The Hague to Russia. The musicians play the same melody and try to stay together, but they can't coordinate precisely. Time can only be tentative. The interface is audibly present, I hear glitches in the channels of the players. But the ensemble plays on, together, distorted, fragile, note by note. Nothing here is Just In Time. What I hear is the music of uncertain distant connections, and it's a miraculous harmony. Music of a world coming towards us.





## **Art is not enough**

Noortje de Leij



Gran Fury, **The New York Crimes**, 1989. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Already in the 1980s, at the time of the AIDS crisis, the pharmaceutical company Hoffmann-La Roche was embroiled in controversy. The crude reasoning behind a statement by its spokesman was that, unlike people with AIDS in the 1980s, patients with asthma had a lower likelihood of dying. In other words, asthma medication is be used for longer than AIDS medication. Research into drugs to fight AIDS was therefore less profitable than research into treatments for asthma. In March 1989, the activist artists' collective Gran Fury brought La Roche's statement to the attention of several thousand New Yorkers who had unexpectedly received a copy of *The New York Crimes* in their *New York Times*. The collective had produced 6000 copies of an almost exact copy of the *Times* and folded it around the original newspaper. Assuming they were reading the daily news, *Times* readers were presented with politically charged information on various issues related to the AIDS crisis: from the relationship between AIDS and financial interests ('Aids

and money: Healthcare or Wealthcare?') to the failures of the health care system ('N.Y. Hospitals in Ruins: City Hall to Blame'), the lack of government action ('When a Government turns its back on its people, is it civil war?'), and the disproportionate extent to which the disease adversely affected disadvantaged communities. ('What About People of Colour? Race Effects Survival').

Each virus behaves differently. The AIDS epidemic, which peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, differs in many ways from the current corona crisis. But in at least one respect, there are important similarities: the medical crisis exposes a much deeper socio-political crisis. And that socio-political crisis plays out identically in so many ways.

### **Art at the time of crisis**

It is an oft-heard creed that art can offer hope in times of crisis. British artist Mark Tichner literally put this assertion into practice last month by placing gigantic billboards in various cities in the UK with the message 'Please Believe These Days Will Pass' on them. Throughout New York the public can also find such beacons of hope, in collaboration with various artists a total of 1800 billboards with hopeful texts and thank-you messages have been designed. The balcony concerts that buzzed through Europe like a polyphonic canon reminded us that art could alleviate suffering with the beauty of social harmony even at a time of physical distance. In the April 8th edition of the *NRC* Sandra Smets argued, among other things, with reference to the balcony performances, that art can make the universal dimension of individual suffering experienceable. 'Epidemiological art is, in short, an expression of support, a call for a consciousness of togetherness, empathy'.

This view of art goes back to a Kantian aesthetic tradition where art is seen as something that can transcend its subjective

and historically or geographically specific reality. In other words, art is not bound by the contingencies of time, place or individual lives. As such, the work of art can serve as a kind of universally accessible meeting place where shared experience becomes possible. Numerous attempts have been made to eradicate this eighteenth-century idealistic notion of art. Such attempts, in their stubbornness, only seem to reassert arts universal, timeless character.

At the time of the AIDS crisis, art was also acclaimed for its supposed ability to grasp the power of the human mind; to facilitate the sharing of experiences of catharsis; or to express the universal human condition. Art could transcend life. Ironically, the crisis could even be *good* for art, as it could inspired such beautiful expressions of human suffering. It is a sobering reality that the current corona crisis may actually have a positive effect on art. The artist Andrea Fraser, known for her critical reflections on art institutions, demonstrated, in her contribution to the Whitney Biennale of 2012, that there is a direct link between the increase in economic inequality and the rising prices of art. Economic research showed that 'an increase of one percent in the share of the total income of the top 0.1% causes an increase in art prices of about 14%!'. Many artists will not get survive the crisis unscathed, but the art market may thrive as never before.

The crisis taking place within the corona crisis is a crisis of increasing inequality. We are not all in the same boat together, many have long since missed the boat. Once again, it becomes clear whose lives are not worth saving, who has or does not have the opportunity to escape, and who is able to wash their hands at all. Specificity of place, time and individual lives ensure that suffering is less fairly distributed than we might allow ourselves to believe.

Meanwhile, a massive shift of capital is taking place. Air and rail traffic may be at a standstill, but the flows of finance

continue unhindered. Large portions of the support packages from governments and the European Central Bank flow directly to private parties and are used to pay dividends. *Booking.com* had the misfortune (of course not undeservedly) that its financial practices were noticed and they were crucified in the press. But of course *Booking* is only a singular example in our all-encompassing market system. Economic inequality is the political crisis within the medical crisis. Or maybe it is the other way around: the SARS-CoV-2 virus is the medical crisis within the crisis of a sickened system.

In response to the traditionalist role that art was also given during the crisis of the 1980s, the art critic Craig Owens wrote that the contemplative attitude, which demands that art transcends reality, is passive. Art must intervene. Douglas Crimp was involved in the activist group ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power), from which Gran Fury also emerged. Like they did with *The New York Crimes*, Gran Fury used art to raise awareness for the lack of government funding and pharmaceutical industry investment in AIDS education and research, also bringing into public consciousness the violent forms of homophobia, racism, and sexism that were being revealed in the crisis. Inspired by agitprop, dada and Situationism, the collective used the formal language of advertising and mass media to intervene in public space with critical posters and stickers. It was art with a goal: to change the attitude of governments, institutions and the public and to combat the lack of (accurate) information about infection and prevention. Recurring themes in their critique were the inability of the free market economy to formulating an adequate response to the crisis and the disproportionate extent to which economically vulnerable groups and social minorities were adversely affected. Economic and political decisions demonstrated time and again that not every life, and especially not every lifestyle, was equally legitimate or deserved the same care.

In Simone Leighs *Free People's Medical Clinic* (FPMC, 2014) and the sequel *The Waiting Room* (2016) the focus is on racial discrimination in the US healthcare system. Leigh refers to a long history of medical exploitation, neglect and discrimination against the black population. A shocking example is the Tuskagee Experiment, in which 600 Afro-American men participated in a study of syphilis in exchange for free health care but were never informed whether they had the disease, or had been treated for it. Or a recent incident in which 49-year-old Esmine Elizabeth Green, an immigrant of Jamaican descent, died after waiting in vain for 24 hours in the waiting room of Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn, New York to see a doctor. The surveillance footage shows a guard bending over Green's collapsed body and walking on again. By the time a nurse checked her pulse, she had been dead for nearly an hour due to a blood clot that had moved from her leg to her lungs. Green's death appears to be a case of extreme negligence but is merely demonstrates, according to numerous statistics, that women of color in the U.S. systematically have poorer access to care and are systematically more likely than white women to suffer from diabetes, heart disease and fatal complications in childbirth. Again, figures show that the black community is disproportionately ill-affected by corona infections. Economic deprivation, inadequate health insurance and discrimination in hospitals and medical practices lurk behind these worrying statistics.

According to Leigh, the number one cause of death for black women is *obedience*. Waiting, as she demonstrates in her tribute to Green, is literally fatal. She combines the stories and histories of the oppression and neglect of black bodies with records of various social movements that rebelled against this, such as the Black Panther Party's free medical clinic and the United Order of Tents, a secret black sister order. In the *Free People's Medical Clinic* and the *Waiting Room* project Leigh organised several workshops and meetings in which self-care and new

forms of collectivity were explored. Her work thus combines a critical historical awareness of oppression and struggle with the exploration of alternatives that cast into question the prevalent forms of public health care.



Simone Leigh, **The Waiting Room**, New Museum, 2016.

Gran Fury and Simone Leigh are examples of artistic interventions that arose from a deep sense of urgency. Both show how the body is a political battleground. The coronavirus once again shows that this battle is not yet over.

## Crisis

'Daß es so *weiter* geht, ist die Katastrophe' Walter Benjamin wrote in 1937. What we call progress *is* the catastrophe. According to Benjamin, the world as a whole was a permanent catastrophe that was ravaged through and through with destructive force. ('Real') progress is only possible when progress ends. To Benjamin, standstill was progress; revolution was to break the status quo. Together with Bertold Brecht in 1930, at the time of the rise of Nazism in Germany, he imagined starting a magazine called *Krise und Kritik*. According to Brecht,

treating every crisis separately (e.g. in science, medicine, trade, or marriage) will not lead to an insight into the great all-encompassing crisis of which these are only ephemeral manifestations – seemingly independent of each other.

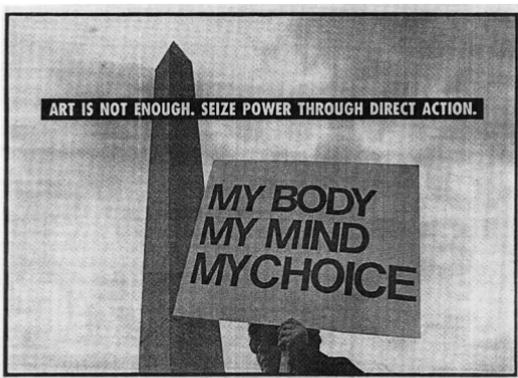
The magazine they had in mind (but never realised) would have the crisis in all its ideological facets as its subject. The original meaning of the word crisis was central to this. In Ancient Greek, *crisis* meant 'decision' (from *krinein*: to decide, to judge, or to distinguish). Later, crisis within a medical context indicated the crucial tipping point in a patient's disease course. The crisis was the moment when it became clear whether the patient was definitively approaching death or whether the process of physical recovery had begun.

For Benjamin and Brecht, crisis was both the catastrophic state of Europe in the 1930s which they wanted to subject to their analyses and aesthetic reflections, but also implied the possibility of a tipping point. The crisis therefore had to be 'realised' in Brecht's words in the double sense of the word: one had to become aware of the crisis of modernity, and that awareness could offer the opening to a possible revolution. *Criticism* was needed for this. Benjamin and Brecht imagined that their journal would provide a platform for an interventionist way of thinking (*eingreifendes Denken*), for criticism that was effective and consequential had to be organised collectively. Critique should be the prelude to political action, as the 'continuation of business by other means,' as Brecht wrote.

Despite attempts to label the virus an external enemy (e.g. by calling it a 'Chinese virus') that temporarily interrupts the 'normal' order, it is clear to many that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has its origins in the disastrous way we have arranged the world, and that it works like a magnifying glass for the problems that are intrinsically linked to it. This raises the hope for many that the crisis may be a turning point. Art might now be able to play a

role in sketching a new future, to imagining how we can organise the world differently. Benjamin warned, however if we lose ourselves in dreams of the future, we will only wait. The crisis offers even more opportunities for the further concentration of capital, for the further stripping of the public sector, including the cultural sector, and for authoritarian leaders to draw more power to themselves, legitimised with claims to be serving the common good. 'Only a crisis – real or perceived – causes real change,' as Milton Friedman, one of the most prominent architects of neoliberalism said 'When that crisis begins, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are alive at that moment,' It's not hard to guess whose ideas will prevail if we wait until everything goes back to *business as usual* and which ideas will remain only dreams.

'Art is not Enough' was printed on one of Gran Fury's posters, an ironic message that in its activist intentions seemed to go beyond art but at the same time showed an awareness of its own limitations as art (after all, it was brought forth in the form of a work of art). Neither Brecht nor Benjamin had the illusion that art or criticism were the goal. But if art wants to offer us some hope, it can't wait too long now. Before we know it, everything will remain just a little bit more of the same.



Gran Fury, **Art Is Not Enough**  
[Seize Power through Direct  
Action], 1987. Manuscripts and  
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