

THE POST-PANDEMIC UNIVERSITY

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Art without Place: Giving voice to the useless worker

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In response to the fragmentation of the visual arts brought about Covid-19 there have been a number of projects which have attempted to capture a sense of the collective. **The Covid Art Museum** has published more than 1 million artworks online made under quarantine, the **Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin** has curated 'letters' responses from prominent artists and researchers from around the world. In the first months of the European pandemic, the hashtag **#artistsupportpledge** was a global social media campaign which aimed to support artists through a reciprocal scheme of small sales of works. A different kind of endeavour was the online survey of the cultural sector and subsequent published **book Art Without Place**. This project by the artist **Ana Kuzmanić** was less focused on the artwork itself as the new material conditions in which cultural workers now found themselves.

The future of the arts after Covid-19

The call for contributions to **Art without Place website** was initiated online in April 2020, and most were written in the period of April-June 2020. The prompt for contribution was in the form of a survey, each was asked to describe the challenges facing work and family life within the pandemic, accompanied by the question 'How do you imagine the future of the arts after Covid-19?'. The resulting short texts are both subjective and objective, domestic details mentioned next to infrastructural worries, feelings running into concrete proposals.

One year later the responses appear like relics from of a period of shock. Indeed, a very physical post shock resonates from the Croatian contributors, in the recounting of the earthquake which hit in late March just as the country entered lockdown – an almost too literal metaphor for being shaken by the rate of change.

It is striking reading the responses how many of the uncertainties and the anxieties from this period remain unanswered. In many of the countries where contributions come from cultural venues are only just reopening, arts programmes remain postponed or partially placed online. Government borrowing has protected the capitalist economy for now, and the arts has not yet fully felt the direct aftereffects. Trying to find patterns becomes difficult, as has often been said during this pandemic, the difference in material conditions, homelife and environment has become even more marked.

Between despair and hope

Unsurprisingly, a fair amount of desperation is expressed, notably regarding the already precarious working conditions for those in the arts and there is much speculation on forthcoming funding cuts. But what I didn't expect was the extent of hopefulness displayed, many people seemingly comfortable in their own settings, believing in their renewed time for creativity as a 'cure' to their own mental health and their 'inner creative infrastructure' providing sustenance. Nonetheless, we must take into account that many of these were written in the only period of enforced rest, and the only time in many European countries that we had ever been fully locked down.

I want to ask every contributor: What has changed for you now? Have you continued to play with clay? Do you still feel like a hamster sometimes? Are you now unemployed? I wonder if the fatigue which I know many have felt as the year of the Zoom has worn on, and what Ana Kuzmanić describes in the preface as the institutional "battle for clicks", has affected those optimistic for the possibilities of the digital arts reach. I wonder how the university lecturers would reflect on an overworked year of teaching online...

However positive or negative the perspective on how Covid-19 will shape their future and the arts, the uniting theme is the idea of radical change as a fragile opportunity and one that should be grasped. The need for a 'resetting' of the arts is invoked in many a passage, new normals, better normals, or not being able to imagine a normal, are expounded in equal measure.

Global challenges and nationally atomised concerns

Ana Kuzmanić is Croatian, the book, *Art Without Place*, is published by Oaza Books, and is edited by herself and Petar Jandrić, who are all based in Zagreb. It therefore has a strong Croatian perspective. However, the research has a broader reach and the participants also reflect on circumstances in Spain, Slovenia, The Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Greece, the UK, the US, and Israel. There is a sense in this book of bringing together what can feel like nationally atomised concerns.

Art Without Place provides a snapshot of conditions for cultural workers in the so-called developed economies of the "western world", with their relative levels of state support and neo-liberalisation. For example, there are fears of introducing market driven competitiveness in Croatia, compared with fears of it ever-increasing in the US. In the Netherlands there is a general anxiety that public funding will decrease, whilst in Croatia "financiers" are named as directly being able to "pull the plug" if content is not produced.

There are specificities and similarities depending on from where the texts are written and the sense that art has lost the connection to the physical institutions which structure its funding, but *Art without Place* as a title is not to be taken as a pan-national mission. It is instead the emphasis on art's diminished place in society which is the more pointed concern. I take the title as referring to a general sense of last gasp instability, a shunting from any anchors of public value that still existed.

Taking an overview this collection of responses is instructive in terms of how art workers view themselves; they know their position is marginal in a time of crisis, and if art is of use it is only as therapy. Indeed anecdotally, I know of many who have considered and are pursuing other careers in the pursuit of usefulness (and cash). One respondent describes feeling unable to promote their exhibition because others have lost their jobs. This is an ethical dilemma which needs to be unpicked; what is it about art (work) which renders it excessive in times of crisis?

To veil or to unveil?

I would like to focus on one respondent's insight that "[i]t is apparently the task of artists to veil (crises, faces, themselves) rather than to unveil" and open up questions of legitimacy which seem to have been internalised. I take the idea of unveiling to mean dissection of society, a critical outlook,

culture as about more than escapism. Why has this become a less valid strategy for art workers in the face of a virus?

The value of culture has been recognised but for different health related reasons. In words of **Mark Banks**, “[w]hile culture and arts may not be vital to the preservation of life, they are proving increasingly vital to preserving the sense of life being lived”. This well-worn argument for arts valued in terms of personal wellbeing introduces an unfair contrast to survival, crucially missing a societal, collective value to the arts, beyond creating a group of happy people.

To further illustrate the ethical complexity the pandemic has created for art, I will provide an example from my own practice. I am an artist from the UK. At the beginning of 2020, I was preparing for a performance which had a provisional name: *Stout Hearted Heroes*. At the end of 2019, I visited Estonia where, in the **Kumu Art Museum**, Tallinn, there is a permanent exhibition of Estonian art from the Soviet era. I had appropriated this title from the museum’s interpretation text, which quoted a government official’s conception of the artist in Soviet times. This was a reference which was part ironic, and part a longing to be a stout-hearted hero in a cultural climate where artistic labour is devalued and co-opted into a bunch of public-private partnerships. But then the pandemic hit, and when I did eventually rework the performance – an in-person taxi service became a series of virtual taxi rides (see the performance **Here to Deliver**) – the initial title had to be disowned.

The (non)-essential workers, and workers’ solidarity

In the UK and worldwide, governments and the media replayed hero, hero, hero, clap, clap, clap, again and again, the invocation of war in the face of a microscopic organism has been widespread and pervasive, with parallels to World War II used to conjure a sense of togetherness against a common enemy. But a public health solidarity should be seen as distinct from a workers’ solidarity. When exploited low paid workers are turned into key worker heroes (see a good article by in **The Independent by Dalia Gebrial**), this pits essential worker against non-essential worker. In words of **Albin Wagener**: “Those seen as essential victims (such as nurses) are recognized through a discursive token of heroes, and those seen as less essential victims (such as cultural workers) remain abandoned. This creates a hierarchy of victims.”

This resulting scale of worth has ramifications for art workers who can now be firmly framed as useless. The loud figure of the key worker hero is now fighting in the death-throes of our neoliberal states, fighting for the survival of the neoliberal economy that exploits them. In turn this dangerous societal mood would seem to force a false dichotomy between critique and creativity. So how do art workers gain a seat at the key worker table? Do we want to sit there? Should we be arguing for an alternative valuation of our work alongside the new/old/better normal demands of better pay, secure contracts and keeping publicly funded institutions open?

The importance of uselessness

A project such as **Art Without Place** is important for remembering the shift in cultural life as we experienced it and gives voice to those who are often seen as part of an intellectual elite, but who in fact struggle with precarious underpaid working conditions. Kuzmanić describes standing on her street during a socially distanced earthquake, scrolling through to find a viral Facebook post, “[b]e patient the locusts are coming”. We must assume this tragi-comedic post referred to the very real swarms of locusts ravaging crops in East Africa and West Asia at that point.

Under the weight of trauma, as emergency piles on emergency, the desire to fit into the framing of fighting for survival, to be on side with the useful heroes, is great. But being useless surely must have its place.

Photo by Matias Misael on Unsplash

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