

How are the visual arts responding to the COVID-19 crisis?

May 2020: With the closure of galleries and arts organisations due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis, experts from the curatorial staff at Manchester School of Art at Manchester Metropolitan University explore what impact this is having on the visual arts industry and how it has responded to the crisis.

How does the pandemic impact on curatorial thinking?

Gülşen Bal, Senior Lecturer, Curating – Art Theory and Practice:

We are going through unprecedented times that make us rethink our relationship to artistic and curatorial concepts such as socially engaged art practice, the discursive turn, activist art, collectivity/collective practice, governing, solidarity toward shifting new trajectories, and more. If we take the curatorial as a methodology, then what might be the critical reaction to today's digital offerings?

Before the lockdown, I attended the opening of the exhibition '... of bread, wine, cars, security and peace' at Kunsthalle Wien, the first exhibition curated by the collective What, How & for Whom (WHW)¹ since being appointed as directors at the Kunsthalle in 2019. It is an exhibition that offers a timely interrogation of the 'old forms of a "good life" and puts the issues of care and solidarity in its very centre... resonating in the changed circumstances'. This forces us to rethink the issues of the 'individual' and 'collective' and the expanded problematics of where critical art is.

We face an almost impossible question: how can one explore creative strategies when it comes to redefining a critical curatorial practice? How does this 'new normal' impact the concept of the curatorial, particularly as an engagement of creating criticality in creative space? Furthermore, how do context specific projects and artworks become meaningful outside the signifying context of the exhibition? In considering the practice of curating in particular, it is very much one of connection, of making constellations. Interestingly, how could an uncertain 'future' as present experience contain transferable platforms?

My recent curatorial project, 'It Never Is!', which took place at Q21 INTERNATIONAL / MuseumsQuartier Wien as part of Vienna Art Week, examines various modes of interaction in order to challenge predetermined forms of conflicting forces. At the same time, it also probes the issue of what cultural hegemony denies in circumstances of the variable forms of peculiarity that foster the social process.

¹ The collective WHW, originally formed in Zagreb in 2000 (with Ana Dević), are Nataša Ilić, Ivet Ćurlin and Sabina Sabolović



Hera Büyüктаşçıyan, video still from *Neither on the Ground, nor on the Sky*, 2018, exhibited in 'It Never Is!', Q21 INTERNATIONAL / MuseumsQuarter Wien, 2019, image courtesy of the artist

Tim Brennan, Professor of Art and Head of the Department of Art at Manchester School of Art, delivered the in-situ performance *Vienna Manoeuvre Performance*, a multipart work that combines references to Günter Brus's 1965 artwork *Vienna Walk* and Samuel Beckett's 1966 short story *Ping*. This provides a relevant example of the practice of critical self-reflexivity, particularly in response to how we conceive of criticality, and the awareness of the conditions of its possibility to be seen as constructed out of a particular constellation of situated production. In such a claim, we have another take on a new formation of the dominant idea of political spaces and their occupying restricted places that enable radical social change.

So what is it that is really changing in our lives, dominated as they are now by Covid-19? And how can we introduce 'more art to more people'? How can we foster a sense of closer proximity in which a world is coming to our homes?

What is the impact on artists and how are artistic communities responding?

Zoe Watson, Curator, the Holden Gallery at Manchester School of Art, and Lecturer in Art Theory and Practice:

Artists' lives have been severely impacted by the precarity of the current cultural climate. The forced closure of galleries and arts organisations has led to the postponement or cancellation of work opportunities, while lockdown measures are preventing access to studios, materials, peer networks and production facilities.

Funding bodies across the UK have redirected existing funds to address this crisis. Arts Council England's (ACE) Emergency Funding has made £20 million available for individual artists, creatives and freelancers, who can apply for grants. Meanwhile, the Freelands Foundation have partnered with a-n The Artists Information Company and announced a new £1.5 million emergency fund.



Yelena Popova, *The Scholar Stones Project* at the Holden Gallery, Manchester School of Art, 7 February–20 March 2020

New networks of curators and producers have reached out to offer advisory services to artists applying for emergency funds, recognising that the application process can be overwhelming. As a supportive measure, I have co-formed a group of curators and artists from across the UK to develop an open-ended dialogue. Using our virtual spaces, we want to explore how the studio visit might be reconfigured to exist in a long-term format. For artists, this activity comes with no obligations or expectations; instead offering an open exchange with a practising institutional curator on their own terms.

Artists have continued to find mechanisms to support themselves and each other. The ARTIST SUPPORT PLEDGE (#artistsupportpledge) instigated by artist Matthew Burrows, sees artists selling their work via Instagram for no more than £200 per piece. Each time an artist reaches £1000 of sales, they pledge to spend £200 on another artist's work. With over 100,000 posts (search #artistsupportpledge), an estimated £20 million has been generated for and by artists and makers.

Virtual spaces have become increasingly important as the only way of communicating among ourselves and with audiences. Many artists have moved their practice online, addressing the desire to be visible and productive. By removing physical barriers to accessibility, and eliminating the geographical distance preventing many people from visiting galleries, individuals can engage with artwork on their own terms.

At the Holden Gallery, our exhibition plans for 2020 are constantly being re-evaluated, but we are committed to the artists we are working with, looking to reschedule future exhibitions as soon as we receive news that we can reopen. We have launched a new digital

series of ‘Interruptions’ (www.holdengallery.mmu.ac.uk/interruptions/), designed for people to enjoy from the comfort of their homes, with an attention to listening and wellbeing.

And of course, we have our own community of students at Manchester School of Art who are engaging with their tutors and courses and making work from the safety of their own homes. I am delighted that the University has been able to confirm a series of physical graduate shows and events once we reopen. This is a huge commitment from the University, enabling the current cohort of upcoming graduates to celebrate their achievements in both a digital showcase this summer, and a physical exhibition later in the academic calendar.

How are museums and the media responding to this crisis?

Ann Sumner, Visiting Professor at Manchester School of Art:

This spring of 2020, as museums and galleries across Europe have hurriedly closed their doors, long-awaited exhibitions were cancelled or postponed. After years of research and logistical planning, once in a lifetime shows, from the ambitious ‘Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution’ at the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent (MSK), to the National Gallery’s ‘Artemisia Gentileschi’ in London, all succumbed to lockdown closures.

Ways to appreciate such exhibitions swiftly emerged, such as *The Sunday Times* podcast series by Waldemar Januszczak and Bendor Grosvenor (‘Waldy and Bendy’s Adventures in Art’) who paid a stimulating VIP visit to the Van Eyck exhibition with the curator.

Even so, I’m missing gallery spaces, and art itself, particularly opening private view nights. My mantelpiece is strewn with invitations to events that sadly did not happen. Museums and galleries swiftly teamed up with media partners to enable us to catch up on what we were missing, ensuring art remained a tool in lockdown to help us make sense of the world.

The BBC Four series ‘Museums in Quarantine’ has enabled unique access to key exhibitions, such as Alastair Sooke’s final look at Tate Modern’s Warhol exhibition, followed by historian Simon Schama’s virtual tour of the ‘Young Rembrandt’ exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

There was an overwhelming amount of activity and content in the BBC’s *#Museum From Home* platform, the culmination of a week-long celebration of Britain’s museums and galleries in April 2020. A whirlwind online stream of content from museums and galleries was presented, including some fascinating curator conversations and introductions to regional exhibitions.

Curators and exhibition organisers are thinking ‘outside the box’ to bring the most engaging experiences to virtual audiences during lockdown, and particularly to engage us with all aspects of their permanent collections too. One area of art has obvious potential during lockdown: public art. During their daily exercise, the public can engage with many works still available in outside spaces. My current research on the public art of American

artist Mitzi Cunliffe, who is famed for her design of the BAFTA theatrical mask award, has focused on her works in Manchester. The public can take in her impressive large *Haweswater Aqueduct* relief, which adorns the side of the pumping station, or her recently restored *Man and Technic* outside the Manchester Health Academy in Wythenshawe.

Lockdown has transformed the way we appreciate art, with so much new online content available, technological innovation and excellent media partnerships, the choice has at times seemed overwhelming. Undoubtedly, museums and galleries will have a key role to play as we re-emerge from lockdown into the new norm and redevelop approaches to curatorship and communication with audiences who may well feel anxious about returning to gallery spaces. Access to art from our museums and galleries during lockdown has been vital for so many, fulfilling multiple roles in assisting cultural connectivity, stimulating imaginative creativity and health and wellbeing.