A Curious Present

Philippa Snow

Figure 1. Untitled, 2021, Joey Yu.

In the earliest months of the pandemic, a strange and apparently counterintuitive trend emerged: people began watching movies about deadly viruses. Contagion, a 2011 film by Steven Soderbergh about a rampant, terrifying respiratory virus, began climbing to the top of Netflix's in-site charts; ditto Outbreak, a 1995 film about a virus spread by monkeys. One might think that a newly quarantined public facing a potentially deadly infection may have wanted to avoid such storylines in favour of lighter, more escapist material, but in fact, the opposite was true. Art and culture that related in some way to isolation, sickness, viral spread and loneliness were swiftly prioritised by commissioning editors and audiences alike. Pre-existing films, books and works of art found themselves re-categorised as an 'eerily prescient vision', or as 'accidentally predicting a world post-COVID'. Ottessa Moshfegh's cool, nihilistic novel My Year of Rest and Relaxation, which concerns a pretty, rich young woman who decides to enter into a pharmaceutical coma for a year, gained further popularity, as did Ling Ma's dystopian anti-capitalist satire Severance, which describes a virus capable of turning people into zombies.

In an interview included in this journal, Laima Rudusa, coordinator of the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art, says that her colleague Rebecca Lamarche Vadel often refers to the virus as her 'co-curator'. This witty observation could easily be extrapolated onto culture as a whole since 2020. It is impossible for us to hold public art events in the same way we always have on a literal, physical level, but it is also impossible for us to engage with art intellectually in the way we did before COVID-19. The result is this phenomenon of cherry-picking, guided by our global co-curator COVID, cultural objects that reflect our new reality, even if these objects are not in and of themselves that new. Even the mass-digitisation of the art scene fits into this image of a world trafficking in the tropes of pre-existing sci-fi and dystopian fiction, since such things have always prepared us for a way of life that is both physically distant and entirely global, ruled by screens and streamlined so that culture, once localised and split into different factions –

high and low, for instance – becomes flattened. 'It feels like some sort of new language has developed out of the pandemic', Ingrid Erstad, the Director of Bergen Assembly, suggests in another dialogue included in these pages, citing 'refocusing' and 're-centering' as linguistic cornerstones for the vocabulary we use to address post-COVID-19 strategies.

There are two possible reasons why we seize on the creative and cultural relics of the recent past in order to make sense of a curious present, or of an uncertain future. The first, and perhaps the most acute, is fear: mapping the unfamiliar over the familiar allows us to feel as if what is happening is taking place in an existing framework, making it impossible for any new developments to take us by complete surprise. The second is more interesting on a spiritual and psychological level: it allows us to maintain the cultural image of the creative or artist as a seer or a prophet, whose far-reaching vision has permitted them to beam an image of tomorrow to us through their practice. (Those who work in the creative arts, Gregor Dražil of the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts suggests, have the unique ability to 'make the most of changes that at first seem unfavourable or disturbing'.)

When people all over the world began to stream Contagion in the very earliest days of isolation, nobody was more surprised than those who'd actually made the film. Soderbergh's movie might not technically be art – it may not even be particularly good, and it was not reviewed rapturously at the time of its release. Still, viewers expected it to impart some germane advice about their new reality. 'It is surreal to me', the film's screenwriter Scott Z. Burns remarked to The Washington Post in April 2020, 'that people from all over the world write to me asking how I knew it would involve a bat, or how I knew the term "social distancing." I don't have a crystal ball.' Whether he liked it or not, COVID had curated Burns' work, making him the equivalent of an artist who is 'rediscovered' once their output achieves social relevance – he became, albeit reluctantly, once of the voices of a newly fashionable movement, a new genre.

If a film about a virus killing Gwyneth Paltrow is not suitably highbrow material for audiences looking for something to prepare them for a life of solitude and isolation, there are numerous fine artists who have made work on the subject. Terence Koh, the Canadian artist who once called himself 'the Naomi Campbell of the art world', spent eight hours a day five days a week confined to Mary Boone Gallery in 2011, crawling on his knees around an eight-foot pile of salt, wearing an outfit that resembled white pyjamas. Tracey Emin's 1998 My Bed recorded four days spent without leaving the safety of the duvet. Tehching Hsieh spent a full year locked in an 11.5 by 9 by 8 foot cage for his One Year Performance 1978–1979 (Cage Piece); Marina Abramovic spent twelve days living in three rooms on an elevated platform in a gallery, in silence, for The House with the Ocean View; Chris Burden, in 1971's Five Day Locker Piece, spent five days padlocked in a cupboard at the University of California, with no space to move or sleep; in 1998, Dieter Roth filmed his final days at home, eating or bathing or tinkering in his studio, for Solo Scenes. Each of these works might be said to 'reflect the spirit of the age' – what countless emails and headlines and releases have called, since March 2020, 'these uncertain times'. Does this make the artists responsible for them prescient, or does it make them faintly crazy for deciding to go through an experience of this kind entirely of their own volition?

Art performers who use sequestration, silence and imprisonment as material for their work are usually categorised as 'endurance artists', the suggestion being that no sane person would choose to exist for long periods of time in such conditions unless they were doing so in service of a higher goal. The agony and terror of being held in isolation, not to mention being separated from the faces and the touch of other people, is harder still when experienced outside a gallery, in real life and without actual consent. 'Making art is like writing a diary', the artist Yinka Shonibare wrote in 2020, during the pandemic. 'It's like therapy … people [make art] for their own spiritual nourishment'. Seeing art can work like therapy, too. With this in mind, it is no wonder that we look to those we think of as the diviners and interpreters of our fate for explanation, or for reassurance. As Anastasia Blokhina, Executive Director of Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art, suggests here, in a dialogue with Stacy Brafield, we have always needed culture. 'This

is something that has always been there during the toughest times', she argues. 'This one will be no exception. We just need to learn how to navigate all the new dimensions.'

Philippa Snow

Philippa Snow is a writer based in Norwich. She was formerly the Features Editor of Modern Matter magazine. Her reviews and essays have appeared in publications including Artforum, The Los Angeles Review of Books, ArtReview, Frieze, The White Review, Vogue, The New Statesman, The Financial Times, The TLS, and The New Republic. She was shortlisted for the 2020 Fitzcarraldo Editions Essay Prize, and is currently working on a volume about pain for Repeater Books.