

Barbara Campaner and Gregor Dražil in conversation



Figure 1. Revision, 2021, Joey Yu.

Barbara Campaner, Art Educator (Freelance), Berlin Biennial

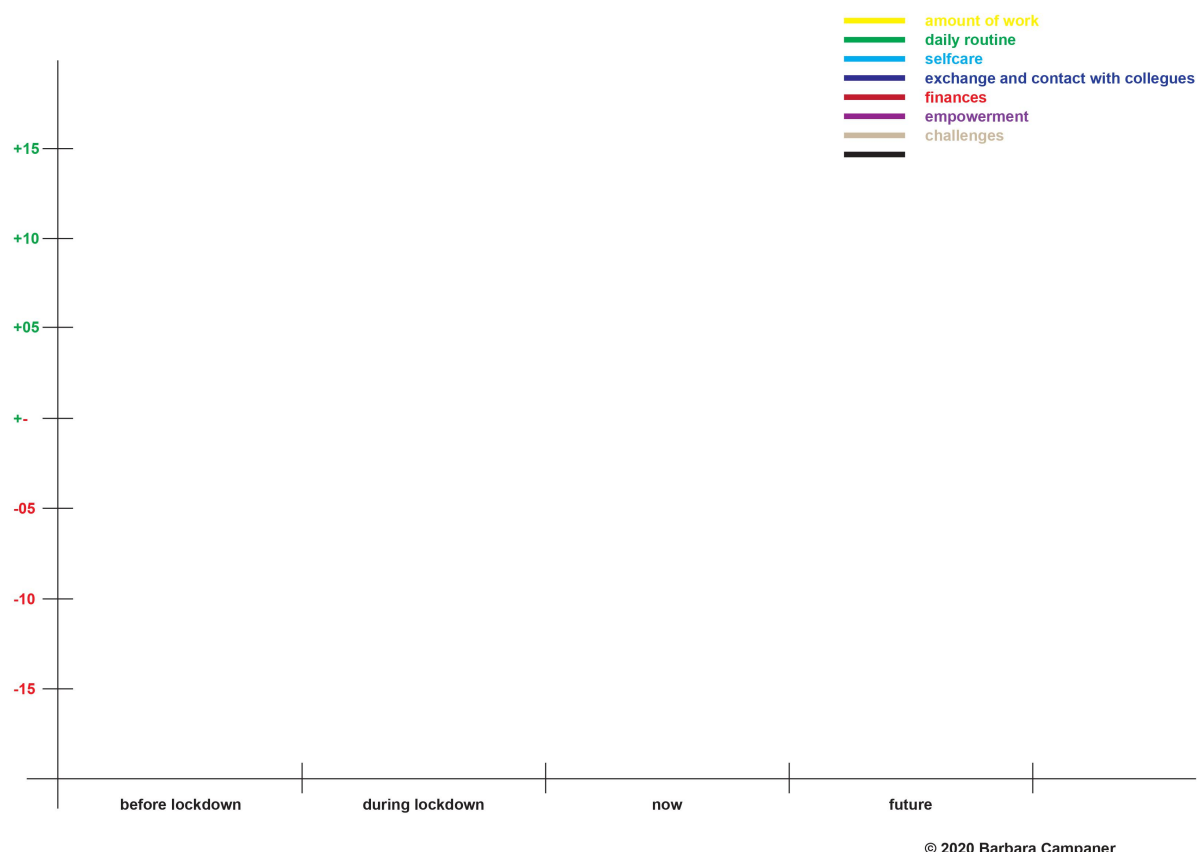
Gregor Dražil, Curator, Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts

Gregor Dražil works for the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC) as a full-time employee.

Barbara Campaner is a freelancer educator who collaborates with several museums and art institutions. The institutional closures during the spring had a substantial impact on their practices, and due to their different forms of employment, disparate consequences. Without doubt these are demanding times for both, as cultural workers. The situation has brought new conditions and ways of relating to aspects of their routine, both professionally and personally.

In Berlin the restrictions began on 13 March 2020 and were lifted at the end of May. The interview took place during a second lockdown, beginning on 2 November 2020, planned to last until early January 2021. In Ljubljana the first lockdown lasted roughly the same amount of time as in Berlin, while the second one started earlier and was very strict and long-lasting due to the enormous spread of the virus. The interview took place during this period, while museums and art institutions were closed.

The graph below presents a 'bigger picture', inviting readers to fill in the diagram with their own data at different time intervals.



What has affected you the most during lockdown?

BC: I would say that the financial struggle and the unpredictability of the near future were and are the most bitter. First, I was shocked and stiff. As I found myself in a very busy period during the spring, I took the lockdown as an opportunity to take a closer look at my working conditions and tried to use the time in a fruitful way. Not knowing much about the pandemic and hoping for the best with the summertime approaching, I wasn't too nervous about the situation I was in. I realised though, very quickly, that the pandemic could have long-term repercussions for my work. And sadly, I was right. The current state doesn't allow for us to foresee when and how we can offer events for the public inside the institutions. And even when museums reopen, there will be very little work for freelancers such as myself.

GD: The pandemic has had much less impact on my work and life in general. I consider myself very lucky to be employed full-time, which gives me financial security during this difficult time. Secondly, as I'm working mostly as a researcher, I've been able to carry on with my work with only minor obstacles. Being able to work has also helped me a lot in coping with the psychological challenges that the lockdown brought.

The most difficult part for me in terms of working conditions has been getting access to libraries and archives, their collections and materials, both in Slovenia and abroad. Telephone and email communication with colleagues from other institutions and, of course, the digital sources have been invaluable, but still the process of obtaining specific information, the field work and communication that you can't establish digitally have been missing.

What was an extreme that you went to, and did you manage to get back from that extreme to a comfortable place?

BC: The precariousness of my work has always been clear to me, but the pandemic has forced me to reconsider the definition of 'freelancer'. I always saw it in a very positive way, accentuating the word 'free'.

Now, all of a sudden, with everything closing, this freedom has vanished. I'm not an artist, I don't create things myself, so I need the art institution, the art itself to be able to work. A synonym for freelancer could be independent, but also unaffiliated, uninvolved, detached ... And this was the murky place to which I went, feeling left out by most (not all!) museums in which I normally have assignments. Some institutions abandoned their independent collaborators and this vulnerability is hard to cope with. It's the perennial issue of art educators having very difficult working conditions.

The experience of the 11th Berlin Biennial as a freelance art educator took me out of the crisis and has showed me that solidarity and a positive team spirit are still something that can be found. The exhibition was, luckily, only shortened and not postponed or cancelled, but we didn't know in what way we could carry out our activities in front of the artworks: how many people could participate? For how long? Which formats were allowed? The open-minded head of education Duygu Örs included the team of freelancers in the conceptions from the very beginning and it felt good. She was very open about the challenging setting, but also wanted to engage us in any case, no matter how the Biennial was going to be realised. The financial arrangement was also handled transparently, which gave me a little guarantee for the summer. The creativity and courage of the entire team shaped the programme and altered my mood. We tried our best to involve the public during these two months.

GD: The first wave of the pandemic coincided with the first year of me teaching a course at the Art History Department at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. I'd occasionally used Zoom, Skype and other digital communication tools before the pandemic, like most of us, but mainly for individual meetings. However, conducting a course for students online – lecturing, but also trying to establish communication with participants – was a very big challenge for me. Although I hope I won't be needing to repeat the same process next spring, when my course takes place again, and that everything will be back to normal by then, I still have to say that after the end of last academic year I felt a sort of a satisfaction that I managed to pull through and get fairly comfortable with the alternative teaching process.

What does a crisis mean to you?

BC: Concerning the experience of the closing of my working places, it's definitely the feeling of not being involved. On a larger scale, it's the fear that my skills and my profession could become less useful or relevant to society, to the community I'm a part of; the feeling that aesthetic education or education through art might become less important or even irrelevant.

GD: A crisis is a change and if I think about how I reacted to the current and previous critical situations, I'd like to think I always tried to make the most of the changes that at first seemed unfavourable or disturbing. During a crisis it's crucial to hold on to your energy and creativity, not to let it disperse and get wasted, but adjust its flow if necessary and direct it into something productive. It's a part of the work ethic for us cultural workers to be able to keep an open mind. We need to be able to think beyond what's already known and proven. This critical, but constructive and productive way of thinking, which is part of our job description, gives us an advantage in times when it's crucial to accept the drastic changes we face and look beyond them.

How did you make and deliver an international biennial and how does it relate to local audiences?

BC: In its history, the Berlin Biennial has always been a magnet for international public and professionals, as well as interested tourists. The 11th edition suffered under the travel ban and the closure of borders. The exhibition responded to the circumstances by bringing in the international through the invited artists and by offering a far-reaching vision of global realities. For me as an educator, it was a journey I made together with the public, and being confronted with mostly non-European artists gave us the opportunity to reflect on our locality, contextualising it on a larger scale. Personally, I tried to reduce distances and ask myself and the public 'What do I see as my role in that?' (speaking for example about neo- and postcolonialism) or 'Where can I find something similar in my community?' By employing new methods, we tried to move out of the exhibition, giving visibility to ideas and topics, working on the streets

and reaching out to the neighbourhood. It's about inviting: I like the concept of sending an invitation, being open to those coming.

GD: The 34th edition of the Ljubljana Biennial will take place in the summer of next year, so the team focusing on the organisation of the biennial has spent most of this complicated year 2020 working on the concept, selection of artists, logistics and other preparations. All this planning and work has of course been affected by the fact that the conditions in which the actual exhibition, its production, opening and the realisation of the programme, were (and still are) uncertain. So while the preparation for the 2021 biennial is now in motion, we're preparing for the possibility that there might still be restrictions on public life when we open the exhibition. This would of course mean that the exhibition itself and the accompanying programme would have to be changed, adjusted, replaced with a Coronavirus risk-free version. The next Biennial will explore the interceptions between fine art, its established aesthetics, values and forms on one hand, and pop culture, 'commercial' art and mass media on the other. Consequently, I think it will be very diverse in terms of artistic media, which should make it adaptable to various scenarios. The most challenging part will be addressing the public who would normally visit the exhibition in person (local audience, international art public, tourists) and engaging them in whatever format the biennial will take place in.

What role does 'the digital' play in your practice? Is digital institutional work going to be essential for your routine? Did your institution go digital before the pandemic? Is a digital presence for your institution going to be a substitute or an additional option?

BC: During (and before) the first lockdown, none of the institutions I worked with went digital. I think there was a general 'breath-holding', and a lot of museums were kind of frozen, trying to switch to alternative strategies. Now, I'm starting to design some digital resources. I've always enjoyed using digital tools offered by other museums (mostly non-German museums) and I missed them here. They can be very appealing if they're able to combine thinking, participating, giving information, as well as playing. Nowadays, it's essential for a museum and also for a temporary exhibition to offer a diversified programme – which also includes digital activities – in order to reach out to various groups of the public. Accessibility and inclusion are also big issues in my work, and online events and resources can be essential for someone who's not capable of coming into an institution. I can't say how this will evolve in the future and how big the impact of digital tools on my future practice will be.

GD: I've mentioned the importance of digital databases, online access to written and other materials that I need for my work. This was very important before the pandemic and it's even more important now. The real challenge has been communication, especially the more complex forms of it – online seminars, roundtables and similar events – that include a larger group of people and require some sort of a debate to occur. It's been very interesting for me to observe how we're getting better and better at this type of communication as we've gained more experience with it. The level of easiness that I noticed in some of these online events lately is remarkable.

Has the pandemic and the drastic change in working conditions brought any positive changes for your work? Has it opened up any new routines or processes that you might want to keep even after the pandemic is over?

BC: This crisis has forged opportunities for a braver kind of creativity and appetite for more experiments. During the Biennale I experienced a high level of flexibility in the public. Sometimes it's not so easy to create new methods in institutions, especially as a freelancer. The hierarchy and the complicated structures are frequently a big barrier to change. I'd like to hold on to visions and dare to break new ground.

GD: I – and my colleagues here at the Museum – have tried to take advantage of the fact that we suddenly had to cancel a large portion of our programme, exhibitions, events and use the time for things that we don't usually get to focus on enough. We've been, on one hand, completing projects that were put

aside before the pandemic and, on the other, thinking of new forms of 'products' and experiences that we as a visual art museum can offer. This includes working extensively on our digital presence (new webpages, collection digitalising), our publishing programme, archives, art collections and so on.

Barbara Campaner and Gregor Dražil

Barbara Campaner works as a freelance art mediator in Berlin. She studied art history in Venice, and came to educational work in museums through a Masters in Art and Cultural Education at the University of Bremen. Since then, she has worked for renowned art institutions (including the Bode-Museum Berlin, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Neue Nationalgalerie, Martin-Gropius Bau, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Bauhaus-Archiv, KW-Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin and Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin) and outstanding special events (including Documenta 12 and 14, Manifesta 7, transmediale 11 and 12, as well as the 7th, 10th and 11th Berlin Biennales for Contemporary Art).

In the course of her many years of experience with heterogeneous groups in various museums and exhibitions, she has acquired methodological and didactic skills in the field of artistic and dialogical art education, as well as in the development of peer-to-peer offers. Particular focal points in her practice are performative approaches to art education, interdisciplinary starting points in the conception of educational formats, and the pursuit of participatory projects and processes that characterise education as a constant open-ended process. In recent years, she has continued her training in inclusive work with and for people with visual impairments and the deaf.

Gregor Dražil is an art historian, employed as a curator at the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC) in Ljubljana. During his time at MGLC, he has contributed articles and other texts on topics relating to the history of Slovenian modern art and art system, edited various publications, and co-authored several exhibitions. He is currently working on his PhD thesis titled Significance and Characteristics of the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the 2019/2020 academic year, Dražil has been co-leading a course for students of Art History at the University of Ljubljana.