

Editorial: Crisis Mode



My fall plans



Delta variant

Figure 1. Fall Plan/Delta Variant meme, 2021, Abi Mitchell.

During the initial wave of COVID-19, as we locked down for the first time, our language began to change. We universally became 'uncertain' yet 'resilient', we 'adapted' and 're-imagined'. We started to use words that simultaneously expressed hope and acknowledged despair. Staying at home to save lives, our communications became ever more digital. Unable to go out, work in the office or mingle in the park, we conducted all our daily conversation through the cloud. Screens displayed our friends, family, and colleagues at odd angles, in strange sizes, and with constant cries of 'You're on mute!'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the popularity and production of memes during 2020/21 went into overdrive. The sheer scale of our contempt for the situation we all faced proved to be the biggest inspiration for witty, ironic and despondent messages. By 2021 we had almost drowned in 'fall-plan' and 'Delta-variant' comparisons.

The Stomach and The Port, Liverpool Biennial's 11th edition curated by **Manuela Moscoso**, scheduled for 2020, but postponed due to COVID-19, the fall plan was a physical, public-facing, performance-activated event filled with living, breathing bodies. While we waited to see if we could open

doors the following year, the Delta variant was to launch an online only programme.

Eventually opening in spring 2021, the Liverpool Biennial spread across partner venues, online platforms and live participatory events. Overlapping, stretching and transplanting itself, it inhabited its host venues like a symbiotic organism, rather than invading like a virus. Throughout the Biennial's duration, the fluidity of the body and its porous nature was highlighted in the projects and events. Non-western ways of thinking challenged views of the body as an individual organism with defined borders.

In the internal workings of the organisation, as if within the stomach, or the gut brain, the team worked tirelessly to produce an international biennial within those 'unprecedented times'. Connected via multiple criss-crossing digital communications (*Teams, Zoom, Whats App, Google Meets, Skype etc etc.*) these electronic platforms became life-lines. Writhing and tangling, they kept us bound together like charged veins.

At a time when work entered our homes and personal spaces, conversations with **Perennial Biennial** colleagues and peers exposed the inner workings of partner organisations. In 2018, a collaboration was launched between **Liverpool Biennial, Berlin Biennale, Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art, MGLC (Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts)** and **Bergen Assembly**, in partnership with the **International Biennial Association (IBA)** and supported by Creative Europe. Named *The Perennial Biennial* it aims to challenge and further the field of biennial practice and strengthen European biennial collaboration. Transcribed in this edition of Stages, are one-to-one discussions between staff members from each of the five organisations about COVID-19 and its wide ranging impacts. The conversations touch on issues from the technical to the personal, showcasing the concerns and crisis points faced not only by Liverpool Biennial, but across the festival sector in Europe, during a period of great uncertainty. These discussions not only helped the teams to find out what was happening in each other's organisations, but also how they could extend beyond their own borders to support each other. The Biennial body here is not one organisation, but a multifaceted organism connected to all those around it. Whether biennials continue to be open and supportive, accessible and connected is another matter. As we progress further into the future, will our lives become the digitally mediated fantasy that many anticipate, or will we steadily revert back to our old ways?

Invited to respond to the conversations, **Fer Boyd** has contributed a new text, *Organs in Amber*, inspired by the inner workings of the Biennial sector and *The Stomach and The Port's* curatorial entry points. **Phillippa Snow** places the conversations amid the wider cultural context of COVID-19's ongoing impacts. Newly commissioned illustrations by artist **Joey Yu** interconnect each conversation, a body of work considering both individual and global crises.

You can find out more about *The Perennial Biennial* project and *The Stomach and The Port* via the Liverpool Biennial [website](#).

Stages #10: Crisis Mode is edited by **Abi Mitchell**. The cover and conversation texts throughout feature a series of newly commissioned illustrations by artist Joey Yu.

Abi Mitchell

Abi Mitchell is a freelance cultural producer, writer, editor and programmer working across contemporary art and music. Previously working at Liverpool Biennial, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and Yorkshire Sculpture International, her work focuses largely on cultural festivals and their public outreach. Driven by a desire to make contemporary art and music more accessible Mitchell has worked in public programming and education for over seven years. Outside of institutions she co-directs SPUR, a not-for-profit arts commissioning organisation based in the north of England that sporadically collaborates with artists and other small-scale organisations to develop experimental programming and art works.