

Helena Geilinger and Lucija Šutej in conversation



Figure 1. Disconnect, 2021, Joey Yu.

Helena Geilinger, Digital Content & Marketing Officer, Liverpool Biennial

Lucija Šutej, Curator, MGLC (Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts)

Liverpool Biennial's 11th edition, *The Stomach and The Port* curated by Manuela Moscoso, was postponed from summer 2020 to spring 2021. The 34th Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, *ISKRA DELTA* curated by Tjaša Pogačar, opened in September 2021, following on from the previous edition in 2019.

HG: We have a list of questions to ask each other. Shall we just take turns?

LŠ: Yes. What has affected you most during lockdown?

HG: I'd probably say the lack of socialising, both at work and personally. I really enjoy and rely on being able to bounce ideas off my friends and colleagues. It's little things, like talking a project through in person. The whole Zoom process really draws everything out – it feels like if you set up a meeting with your colleagues then you have to fill that time, rather than just ask a quick question and crack on. There are some perks, but it definitely doesn't suit my working style.

How about you, what has most affected you?

LŠ: It was different things at different periods. When it all started, it was at times just this overwhelming feeling of insecurity, since we didn't fully know what COVID-19 was. We didn't know how afraid one should be, or how great the danger was. All we knew was that it was really bad. This sensation of uncertainty and unease was accompanied by constant questions – what's going to happen next? When will we be able to return to the normality we knew? Is everyone I know going to be OK and remain healthy? How will our jobs be affected and will our livelihoods alter? These are just some of the daily questions we all struggled with.

The lack of socialising has been very hard for everyone: not seeing people, and communicating with friends and work colleagues solely via Zoom. It was hard to fully communicate, since Zoom can crash and freeze and we miss seeing people in person.

HG: Yes, so many aspects of how we communicate are lost through a screen.

LŠ: What mistakes did you make?

HG: I would say one mistake was not investing in a really good chair and laptop stand. I've had to move around a fair bit, due to losing one of my family members and other complications, so I've had to be pretty mobile and haven't had one dedicated desk throughout the whole period. I never really prioritised a comfortable working space. I guess I was always hoping the pandemic was imminently going to end and we'd go back to the office – a constantly elusive promise of returning to normal. It felt as if investing in a dedicated, productive home working area was like admitting that this was the way life would be indefinitely. Staying in a kind of fluid space was a coping mechanism to make it all seem less permanent.

LŠ: I also made this mistake of hoping that things might gain some sort of normality after the first lockdown. From October 2019, I've been working on a project as curator for the Austrian Cultural Forum London, to present and exhibit some amazing artists from Austria in London in May 2020. All the various partners from UAL, ACF and Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and I kept postponing and postponing the exhibition at the Austrian Cultural Forum London. I think now, looking back at our discussions, they can be seen as us trying to navigate a situation that was unclear to everyone, and we really wanted to support our artists and give them a platform for the presentation of their work, especially as the art industry, like many others, suffered under the impact of COVID-19. So we postponed the original exhibition several times and then in the summer we decided that due to uncertainties that lay ahead – who could predict how the situation would unfold in each country in autumn and winter? – we decided to redefine our exhibition into a physical publication. We called it *The New Normality/Die Neue Normalität* and it was created with the aim to define this 'new normality' we were living in, and specifically how artists respond to it – increased production, acts of rebellion, lack of socialisation, shortage of materials and lack of studios, etc.

HG: What advice did you receive that you found useful?

LŠ: Actually, it was advice from my friends. We were just chatting about how we'd been affected by COVID-19 (some of my friends had lost their jobs) and the hardships we all faced. We all agreed that the best way to cope with everything that was happening at home and abroad in the first lockdown was just to live day by day. And I think that's the advice that most resonated with me – try not to focus on the uncertainties of the future, just take every day separately. How about you?

HG: Similarly, I had advice from a family member who's a therapist. She said that you have to have an endless capacity for disappointment during this time. When I first heard that, I thought it sounded quite negative. But actually, I think it's kind of a positive thing, in that you have to constantly accept that things aren't going to go the way you planned. You can't control things. This capacity is a pretty central part of survival. Trying to live in the present and not plan has been really difficult for me, because I'm a big planner. I always had a jam-packed diary, so it's been a big adjustment. Slowing down is a good lesson to learn, as previously I'd just go from one project to the next and never really take stock and ask what was successful or wasn't successful, what could be improved – it was always just go, go, go. So having a bit more space and time for reflection has been beneficial.

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

HG: This question makes me think of a meme I saw when I was writing my MA dissertation. It was a picture of someone crying on the floor one minute and then the next minute sitting at their computer saying, 'I do not have time to despair.' That's pretty reflective of a lot of this year for me. Sometimes, I just wanted to curl up into a ball and say, 'No, I'm not dealing with the world today.' Then the next minute, I'd be joining a meeting and presenting on a project, totally fine. Total despair and just getting on with it are

definitely the extremes that I've bounced between a lot. It's been a good learning experience to realise that you can pick yourself up and get through, even when everything feels like it's falling apart. What about you? What's an extreme for you?

LŠ: Similar to your feelings: shifting between one minute wanting to just stay in bed and the next working on some upcoming projects at MGLC. What was happening in the summer and now, three months later, really feel like extremes. In August I was coordinating the exhibition of Nora Turato curated by Vladimir Vidmar at MGLC. That we were able to present the physical exhibition to the audience at our museum (of course under the government's guidelines), felt like things were almost back to some level of normal. Ljubljana felt very vibrant, with people socialising, gathering in restaurants, museums etc. But we've been in various stages of quite strict lockdown since October and I've been working from home, so my every social interaction is through Zoom. This whole situation still feels weird.

HG: Exactly. Did you have any projects that you could just carry on with?

LŠ: In the first lockdown, I just carried on with this ACF project. As I mentioned before, we were postponing the exhibition till summer. But then after reflecting on the possibility of the pandemic situation globally taking a turn for the worse again in the winter, we re-thought the identity of the exhibition and how the pandemic has redefined exhibitions in general, and we decided against digital presentation but chose publication as an alternative solution – to offer the audience some sort of intimate experience. The publication was fantastic, not only because we were still able to promote the artists and their respective practices, but because it was a great way to occupy my mind by throwing myself into the production process.

How about you?

HG: I guess work has just carried on and been pretty constant. It was quite a turbulent time, first from deciding whether to postpone, then deciding when to postpone to, then announcing the new dates and finally last week announcing the full programme. It's strange to be working on one programme for such a long period of time, considering that the biennial cycle is generally quite a quick turnaround. But we're really fortunate in that we're working with so many incredible artists, so it hasn't felt repetitive or boring. We've had so many brilliant projects and practices to wrap our heads around and interpret that it's actually been an amazing experience to get to know our artists and their work so well. So that's been positive.

Another thing I've just carried on with is running. Throughout both lockdowns, it's been the thing that's kept me sane. It's a great way to untether from reality a bit and process things in my own headspace.

LŠ: What does crisis mean to you?

HG: This is quite hard to describe. I guess previously I thought of crisis as a sudden shock to the system, in that it has connotations of being alarming and immediate. Whereas, in this period, the crisis has been a very slow unfolding of loss, like a slow-motion car crash or disintegration of my old life. As I said, I lost a family member and received a difficult health diagnosis in the family, so it's been a really challenging time. I also lost several colleagues who left the organisation, which was quite difficult because they felt a lot like family to me. Another big adjustment is that I haven't been home to Liverpool since March, which has felt like a total displacement. So crisis for me hasn't been one particular point of despair. It's more like lots of situations to adapt to. But overall, I think it's just about getting through the day. Work has helped with that, since it's provided some semblance of consistency, which I'm grateful for.

LŠ: I'm so sorry for your loss. I can't imagine how hard this must have been for you, while also dealing with a global pandemic.

HG: It's been a difficult time for sure and a lot for my family to go through together. It was just really fortunate that I was able to spend time at home with them. It would have been a lot harder if I'd been locked down in Liverpool. So I'm grateful for that.

LŠ: That's good, to have that support at such a critical time.

HG: Okay, so what does crisis mean to you?

LŠ: I just wrote down: difficulty, uncertainty, danger, shock. Looking back, the first lockdown was a complete shock to the whole system – just because it was so sudden. I left London for home, and the situation was very serious with the global pandemic and then there were more additional worries as a family member was in a critical condition in hospital, and Croatia was affected by numerous earthquakes and in the summer with floods – which both devastated the homes of many of my family members. We all felt utterly overwhelmed to be losing our homes in such critical and challenging times. It was just an incredibly stressful period, along with the daily experience of lockdown. Just so much to process.

HG: Yes, that sense that the world is crumbling, but also that there are natural disasters and so many other crises on top of that is very intense.

I think the times when I've really experienced that sense of panic is when I've spent too long reading the news. For the most part, I've tried to stay calm and keep going. It was only when I had to work on shooting films that involved travelling to visit different artists' studios that I felt overwhelmed and panicked. You have to think about duty of care, legality and health and safety, which means reading a lot of information about the virus and worst-case scenarios. It's hard when there's all that responsibility placed on you for the physical well-being of others. I'm really fortunate to have such a great team who've been so supportive and calming, and luckily, we've all stayed safe and well.

LŠ: How has COVID-19 impacted locally?

HG: It's hard to define what local means to me. I still very much see Liverpool as my local, even though I haven't actually spent the pandemic there. As you know, Liverpool has suffered immensely in this crisis, not only with incredibly high infection rates, but also having been used as a testing ground for ill-conceived government policies. This has been difficult to hear about from my colleagues and friends, when I've been home with my family in Brighton. This whole experience, though, has changed people's experience of local. Local has retreated to become the people you live with. I think that's difficult, because it's a very different way of thinking about your space, health and community. That's the major impact I've experienced with my family and friends – points of togetherness, points of loss, and appreciating the value of the quality time that we can have together.

What about you?

LŠ: Everything started when I was in London, which has been my home for the last years. Croatia and Slovenia are where my family lives. As we speak, my local is Ljubljana and it's an odd déjà vu feeling, because I grew up here, I spent my childhood here, but all the years that have passed and the impact of COVID have changed it for me. So my local is an integration of all the places I consider my home.

HG: It's super strange to spend so much time in Brighton where I grew up. My parents have actually moved from the house I grew up in, so living here recently has felt like relearning a city that I knew so well. You end up paying attention to so many more details when there are no people around to distract you from the actual setting. One thing I've really appreciated is being by the sea in lockdown. Throughout the summer, I swam a lot and then recently got a wetsuit for winter. I never appreciated the sea enough when I grew up here. I think it's one of those things that when it's right on your doorstep, you take it for granted. It's just such a restorative experience – being able to wash away all that stress and anxiety.

LŠ: How do you relate to the situation internationally?

HG: It feels pretty abstract, since it's really hard to get a clear picture of what's going on elsewhere. No country seems to be doing a brilliant job of managing it, and they're all trying to present other countries as doing a worse job, to save face and reputation. I definitely think the UK has mishandled things on an extreme level. Yet so much media coverage is saying, well, America is much worse. It's a really unproductive form of reporting. It makes it hard to know what's really happening. I've just kind of shut off from the news recently. I really needed a break after the US election!

LŠ: Same. I haven't read the news since the US election results. The headlines in our newspapers are basically the same every day. The situation with the pandemic here has been very serious for months and

reading the articles daily just makes one depressed and anxious, so I stopped.

HG: What do you think of the term 'hyperlocalism'? And how would you interpret the positioning of it in your institution?

LŠ: Hyperlocalism is one of the effects of the global pandemic. We've become more engaged on a local level – more aware of local discussions and issues. However, due to technology, we've also been able to engage with international happenings and discussions. At MGLC we focused on the local in the sense that only a local audience was able to physically visit and experience our exhibitions. Nevertheless, we maintained our international audience and the art world engaged in the conversation around our work via our digital channels. These periods of lockdown enabled the space for reflection.

HG: When I think of hyperlocal, it makes me think more of the arts sector than the geographical surroundings. There haven't been a great deal of local experiences. This past year, the art world has had a lot to answer for. Some very important and urgent challenges have been made, and a lot of crucial issues have gained essential coverage and recognition, such as Black Lives Matter, the treatment of disabled workers, failures in digital accessibility. There's a lot we need to learn together. Our increased dependency on online culture has brought positives and negatives, but I think it's underlined the need to be less hyperlocal in terms of insular institutions in the cultural sector. That's a positive step.

LŠ: I agree. The next question is: how did you make an international biennale, and how does it relate to local audiences?

HG: The lack of local experiences this year makes it hard to get a sense of what our audiences are expecting. A lot of this conversation involves digital, since we want to be able to create a fully accessible version of the biennial for all of our audiences, including international visitors. But the question is, how do people engage with that? Do people want that? It's become an expected provision now, yet it's still very unclear how interested people are in the output. What need is it serving, and how can it be improved? We're still at such an early point in figuring it all out. It's hard to navigate on the local and international level what it means to deliver a digital biennial, or a physical experience. We're really fortunate to have seven outdoor artworks and public sculptures, because, no matter what happens, we can still put them out there. So I guess we're different from other organisations that are totally venue-based. Knowing that we have that public offer has given us confidence and motivation to push through and deliver a really great festival.

LŠ: I joined MGLC this year and we're preparing the biennial for the upcoming year. But at the moment, obviously, it's very hard to predict what it's going to look like. We have a focus group working on next year's biennial with visual artists, critics, curators etc. We're hoping that the upcoming edition of the biennial will be able to take on a physical form and welcome local and international visitors in person, just because it's in the summer (in the summertime this year in Slovenia, we recorded fewer cases of infection). Digital presentation is going to be a parallel lifeline going along with it.

Regarding relating MGLC to a local audience, it's important to stress that each edition of the biennial has incorporated the city within its structure through welcoming numerous institutions and open spaces as various parts of its platform.

HG: So who is your audience, and how has it changed?

LŠ: Speaking from the perspective of the current situation – lockdown – I think our audience is mostly online and international. Since the inception of the Biennial, the audience has always been international – its history and tradition testify to this. We've always played a part in the international discourse around contemporary art and defined what we do and how we contribute to this discussion on an international level. But purely in the terms of visits, since the end of summer, the audience that physically visited the museum was predominantly local. Additionally, for the last three months, under the new rules, we've been closed to the public.

How about Liverpool Biennial and its audience?

HG: We have a very big international audience, as well as our local, regional and national audiences.

For this edition, we've switched from our usual format of inviting all our international artists to the opening and we're now making the closing weekend in the summer the main event. It's the safest way we could plan to bring everyone together to celebrate what's been achieved. In terms of our local audiences, I'm really excited to be working with our amazing partner venues to highlight the incredible cultural offer of Liverpool. It's brilliant to have a much stronger local connection in terms of our event programming than we've had previously. Our audiences have been so supportive and engaged during this past year and I think whatever happens next spring, it will just be amazing to celebrate in the city we love with the local people who are the absolute heart of what we do.

Helena Geilinger and Lucija Šutej

Helena Geilinger is a digital producer who specialises in web-projects and online content. She has worked for visual arts organisations in Melbourne, Berlin, Liverpool and London – most recently FACT and Liverpool Biennial. After her MA in Art, Aesthetics & Cultural Institutions at the University of Liverpool she founded RE:WRITE, an ongoing research project and event series dedicated to enhancing public understanding of digital technologies. She co-runs the arts criticism zine un_bound and works as a freelance designer, illustrator and digital creative.

Lucija Šutej is an independent curator currently preparing an exhibition for MGLC (International Centre of Graphic Arts) in Ljubljana. Previously she was in-house curator at MGLC, the latter is the organiser of one of the oldest biennials dedicated to printmaking. Šutej also curated the museum's residency programme and worked on the institution's annual exhibitions programme. In 2020 Šutej curated a publication *The New Normality/Die Neue Normalität* for Austrian Cultural Forum London that addressed artistic production and exhibition-making in the midst of global pandemic, examining our so-called new normality. The publication was co-created with University of the Arts London and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna with the generous support of the Austrian Ministry of Culture.