

On Artmaking In A Pandemic

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Here we are, disinfecting, (hopefully) wearing masks outside, mostly in our homes, or, if a key worker in the UK, Indonesia or the US (to name a few examples), risking our lives under a government that has failed abjectly to protect us. We may well be worn out by the news. We may well be fatigued by anxiety. What does it mean to think, feel, and write about artmaking in a global pandemic? As ever, what constitutes "artmaking" is innumerable different experiences, requires a decentralised view.

This looks, of course, like freelance artists losing work, like already vulnerable artists made more susceptible to domestic violence in lockdown, or homelessness, joblessness, or (increased) poverty. It looks like schedules being shifted en masse--of exhibitions, conferences, and launches moved to 2021, whether the Jakarta Biennale or art book releases. It also looks like frazzled, striving parents trying to make crafts with their children at home--in all kinds of homes, from underresourced neighborhoods (what some might derogatorily refer to as "slums") in Southeast Asia, to middle-class homes in suburbs in South America. It looks like the songs migrant workers in India might hear when passing a radio, making their hard way home to their families, without convenient transport or adequate personal protective equipment.

As arts organisations send emails en masse on the value of art in a time of crisis, we need to remember that "artmaking" is never value-neutral, an inherent "positive". It has always been and continues to be a practice rooted in material conditions, in the social and economic histories and presents of what "art" means, and what it means to make it.

So artmaking looks like fallout--it looks like the vulnerability of migrant workers who journeyed to build giant art museums in other countries, and became deeply susceptible to injury, death, and theft as a result. It looks like their families, and the families of all who've been made more vulnerable by the processes of "the art world" in late stage capitalism, being more vulnerable to COVID-19. Contracting it, spreading it, and dying from it.

So artmaking looks like the indigenous families dispossessed from their lands by plantation owners who buy emerging artists' work, and these families now facing a pandemic with the weight of greater risk. It looks like the low-income families in cities whose houses have just been razed for upscale apartment buildings, that will display high-priced paintings, and how these families carry the greater weight of risk as well.

Artmaking in a pandemic looks like finally making art courses and tours of museums and galleries "accessible" and "online"--but without accessibility in education procedures, such as asynchronous remote learning, captioning, and others that scholars such as Aimi Hamraie have been trying to educate people on. Procedures that actually worsen these experiences for the many chronically ill and/or disabled (the largest minority in the world).

Artmaking in the era of COVID-19 looks like the swift adoption—in many cases, in just the first few days of the pandemic—of work from home options and other accessibility features that we disabled and chronically ill people have been campaigning for in the arts for many decades. In other words, it is only when non-disabled people are at risk that these measures are seen as urgently necessary. And for many of us disabled art workers, and art workers outside large cities, who have faced lack of employment options and/or risks to health due to lack of remote options, for instance, this hurts. This hurts quite a bit.

There is pain that comes with extremely belated measures, combined with non-acknowledgment of those who've been fighting for them. And there is the pain that comes with facile statements like 'Now I understand what it means to be chronically ill'. Particularly when new art opportunities, events and projects on "isolation" and "illness" are cropping up, that do not aim to uplift art workers who have lived many years as chronically ill and/or isolated and/or incarcerated and/or disabled people, vulnerable to illness; that highlight, even now, the work of non-disabled people.

Artmakers are all of us, and we are dying and becoming ill along the faultlines of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, immigration status, caste, class. Power imbalances continue to prove deadly.

One form of answer is to collectively dismantle ableist violence in artmaking, to make communities' and individuals' lives better by doing so. This means rejecting capitalist models of artmaking that permeate popular culture, as evidenced in the misguided calls for the everyday person to make art during the pandemic for the sake of "productivity". Certainly, consumption and creation of art can be incredibly nourishing, and calming, and healthy and helpful for all of us. But not because we are pushing ourselves to "achieve" art goals, without which we are somehow seen to be lesser people. Especially during a pandemic, which is wreaking havoc on anxiety levels, and making home circumstances uncondusive to the unhealthy drive to produce, produce, produce.

We should not go back to the state of the art world before the pandemic—we should attempt to make it more humane, more equitable. If, as Arundhati Roy says, the pandemic is a portal, we need to move away from the violence that has undergirded so much of our art. Artmaking based on solidarity principles has to be the way forward. And if as disability activist Alice Wong says, disabled people are modern-day oracles, we need art initiatives to be disability-led, as people with lifelong experiences of how to deal with and combat ableist violences in the arts.

There are various disabled artists who've written about how to tackle ableism in the fine art world, including myself, in terms of policies such as accessible venues, access aides such as motorised wheelchairs, tours for D/deaf and/or blind visitors to galleries and museums, relaxed performances (in which disabled people who may, for instance, make various sounds are welcome), and the like.

However, especially in the COVID-19 era, we need to think far beyond these measures, and look at "the art world" in terms of transnational, colonial socioeconomic structures. Dismantling ableist violence looks like thinking of artmaking not only as an industry as it operates for the rich, but of what financing this industry entails.

Jasbir Puar's *The Right To Maim* covers how "access" and "inclusion" of D/deaf and/or disabled people in the so-called Global North runs parallel to the deliberate maiming, the deliberate debilitating and disabling, of communities bearing the brunt of Western imperialism, whether in Palestine or Ferguson. Resources are extracted wholesale in mining and plantation operations in Indonesia, which may allow the enrichment of an oligarch's charitable body to fund an increase in accessibility measures at a large art gallery in Europe. At the same time, these plantations and mines leach toxic tailings that poison and kill children.

Understanding the flows of violence and capital at these scales is to understand ableism—ableism as the structures that determine who is "a good body", who is deserving of survival and wellness.

Thus, speaking of ableism "the art world" should also include understandings of citizenship and residency statuses as violent border processes that affect art work and art workers. It should include the continued colonial destruction, cooptation, and theft of indigenous art forms, removing access to sources of spirituality and wellbeing, holding heritages hostage.

When I think of hopes for a better art world, I think of a decentralised view of multitudinal, anticolonial, anti-ableisms working in concert. I think of art with solidarity in mind, that acknowledges on a bodily level the costs of making art for all the communities we are tied to, through current and past harmful, capitalist processes.

Arts landscapes that not only centre those who have been calling for change and are most vulnerable in a pandemic, but ones that let us lead. We have survived crisis and trauma, and despite being systematically denied the accommodations many now enjoy, have continued to create, to dream.

Self-wellness that isn't corporatised and geared towards profiting the few. Community and communion centred on regeneration--in all the many, myriad forms this can take around the world. The acknowledgment of and reparations for a lack of prior support for disabled, chronically ill, and incarcerated and otherwise endangered artists. The flourishing of online art events, festivals, and artworks--overwhelmingly by the non-disabled, non-incarcerated, non-refugee, and not catering specifically to isolated populations--would do well to have this necessary apologia in mind. The revitalisation, preservation, and restitution of traditional arts. Attendant commitment to dismantling colonial structures of harm that continue into the present, and endanger us. A sincere investment in understanding the nuances and complexities of a plethora of models for bodyminds, for disability, that vary geopolitically and culturally, before painting all art in pandemic times with the same brush.

In late-stage capitalism, we are complicit--as all of us are in the marketised, overarching sphere of financial flows--in the material nature of 'the art world'. The pre-pandemic 'normal' of the art world benefitted the few, endangering, injuring, and killing the many. The art world to come, the art world in this pandemic, should be geared towards anti-imperialism, anti-ableism, and a world of art that protects all that it's long made vulnerable.