

Stages #10



# Crisis Mode

Liverpool  
Biennial

# 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.

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## 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.

# Organs in Amber

'But don't you think we'd better press on?' – The liver to the beating heart.

'I don't know. I've never witnessed such a chasm of light before. It looks like butter melting into lead.'  
– The beating heart slowing, its thick thump dripped and replaced with a harvest of heady atoms.

'It's just a split in the skin! We'll be able to fuse it pronto!' – Fresh blood cells coursing to climax their coagulation over the frill-mouth.

A surge of adrenalin from the glands, then the bones secrete the panic hormone. A hot flash ripples, followed by a ringing in the ear canal. It reaches a pitch so tinny and high that it sounds like a mouthing of c-r-i-s-i-s. The veins begin to thrash, confused.

'They think that wink of blue sky is a clot! They only know *themselves* as the colour of forget-me-not. They think death is imminent!' – The kidneys, clanging together, perpetually smug at their own miracles of detoxification.

'Ummm? Haven't they ever read a book?' – The thyroid, yawning into the boom network of the mesentery.

'We haven't forgotten. This isn't new to us.' – The oldest blood cells in the body answer, astringently. They sign to the mouth to replace 'the pandemic' with 'this pandemic' but the cheeks ignore the bargain, keep flaccid.

'What do you think happened out there? To cause such radiant light to spill into us?' – The tendons, ever wistful.

'It's quite nice to be able to see outside for a change. Look, there go hands and coffee cups, IDs and flowers, needles... WOW is that what the sphincter looks like from the outside?' – The pancreas, waving.

'Wait WHAT?! Let us see!' – The small and large intestines rush the frill, gaping.

'Oh sorry, it moved! Too bad... That was really something!' – The kidneys, brushing off the words, not knowing themselves whether they saw something lush or horrendous.

'I actually quite like our perma-dark in here, and the things we see. I know it's mostly food and fingers, but maybe one day it will be a baby or a blade.' – The spleen, sadly set to neutral, has been muscling up to speak since the jet-black of the body was split into amber.

'I've heard some mouths call skin claustrophobic. But some bodies even put a second one on, made of shining latex, so that they can feel safe, clung, compressed.' – The stomach, shuddering at the memory of too-tight contraction, leading to a quick vomit.

Outside, a competent voice screams, 'ONLY 10 DECS PER MILLIGRAM!'

'Whaaaaaaa?' – The organs in amber chorus. The natural world doesn't count itself in numbers, it counts in depth, density of colour, in intensity of feeling. Numbers and stats form a lump in the throat.

'What is going on up there? It seems like the frill is getting wider! The shard just keeps on burrowing!' – The appendix, always on the look-out for the light, since it heard that its days were numbered from the liver that was transplanted last year.

The worm-shaped organ continues, muttering amongst its vital work, longing for the hands, one of its collaborators – 'And why do I need to prove the validity of my existence? I've been here since the beginning, and I offer you so many rebooted visions, feelings-reveries-insights-prospects-hope-intuition! If my own system doesn't value me, then how will anyone else? And how would I live not pressed in with all of you?'

'I don't know what to tell you babes!' – The blood cells up top, screaming inanely.

'If there is sun, you should put your face in it.' – The tendons recite quietly.

Viscous particles waft up and out of the still-growing frilly smile. 'How will we build relationships without the smells of the body?' – The soul, weeping.

'Oh wait, maybe it's stopped!' – The kidneys chime.

'OK, BACK TO WORK THEN LADS' – The new liver corrals, eager to affirm its status as top organ, deflecting from the fact that it was the last one in.



'But... Shouldn't we wait and see?' – The lungs propose blindly, every in-and-out breath pushing against the amber tissue.

'NO. No time.' Having been kept on time its entire life, especially in the twenty-four hours after a sesh or a week of antibiotics, the liver isn't keen to get off the clock now.

'Hold on bladder, you're pissing out the teachings!' – The small intestines, looking on as the bladder goes kamikaze.

'I know, I know, I've got to change.' – The liver groaning rotten. 'But I'll hang on as long as I can.' (Imagine an organ with a toadish, smoker's drawl, that, THAT, is the liver).

'LOOK!' – The pancreas.

Through the final pucker of the frill the organs watch the hands scratching marks on the knuckles. *DENIAL* is written on one hand, *PREDICTION* on the other. And they can just make out *remember your position* scrawled in sweaty ink on the palm.

'Here are the jaws of balance for humanity. These two words are what they've got to fold upon themselves. They are the sides of the coin that they'll need to look at, this century.

'Denial is a human symptom of being so freaked out by the luck of your birth that you can't look it in the eye. It's a tool to keep you alive. But, if you use it, it has consequences for the shaping of reality.

'And as for predictions, the hands know them best, because they're the ones that make the things we look at, and the ones that pressed the buttons on beauty and destruction in the last century.' – The neurons whisper out the mouth.

Darkness returns fast, the weather of their crisis sealed by stitches bound to dissolve and leave a bad taste in the pores of each organ. Plush flesh holding them once again inside the feedback loop of their wet suit.

'When will we re-liquefy and run? I thought that was coming.' – The timid spleen split-lips, before motion-sickness draws a tide. 'Wait, are we moving? I feel like we're moving.'

Jumping off the neurons, the hands begin their appeal, talking back to the body –

'We can tell you something of this crisis. We can touch you, and offer you an alternative commentary. We can suck it all up and spit out something like a high-definition jelly, something more like feelings. We can offer you images of such strength in your waking hours that they give you new images to chew on in the absence of fresh stimulation. But under the terms of this system, we need arms to move and eat and make and hold us up as we do our work. Will you be them?'

'Oh *WHAT!* They're taking us back into the system again!' – The organs chorus, distracted.

The hands protest, slicing themselves off at the elbow and drinking the marrow with the rhythm of those on day-release from the fat. They might as well, the organs didn't ask them what they needed, so they made their own luck. The hands scuttle off towards the horizon, licking their fingers.

'No more sweeping statements!' – The stomach lining urges.

'But wait isn't that a...?' – The lungs.

'No more bogus catchphrases as life rafts! Dig in to the words you're spouting! It's your duty! Stop saying things you've heard before! It's all panto when you swing wide. When you say that word, what do you *mean* by that word.' – The stomach lining to the tongue.

The hands sign to the sun: SEE YOU IN THE PARK FOR THE UNANNOUNCED. OF COURSE THE HAND THAT MAKES BEAUTY ALSO NEEDS TO EAT.

'Who?' – The bladder.

The hands speed back for revenge like poison darts, spiders incoming from all directions.

'You can't predict a crisis!' – A competent voice howls from the outside. As the words vibrate through them, the organs grab onto each other to steady themselves.

'Look around you, look with bare eyes, look with fresh words. It's constant and there, *of course* you can. Take the amber and strengthen the flexibility of your soul.' – The eye that has been plucked out the

head, now held in the hand, speaks. 'We must still keep an eye on what we want the world to look at.'

It launches itself and kisses the other bodies, slashed and stubbed, burnt and washed back, from all over the globe, that came for the spectacle, the conversation, the belief, for the world is known from space for its simultaneity. 'IS THAT ENOUGH MOMENTUM FOR YA?'

'HOW MANY REVOLUTIONS AND ENDINGS EVEN WAS THAT?' – Every cell, whiplashed.

Another body, on the other side of the water, has watched the slice, the frill burrowing, and the light. It makes notes for later but its phone dies. It's one of those sensations that repeats on you.

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## Fer Boyd

Fer Boyd is a writer and artist who often creates narratives using concept-engineering, image-writing and cartoonish physics to produce an alterity of the contemporary body. Projects include *Skinned / Detouched* (Eastside Projects & Motto Books, 2018), a pair of books by Alice Channer to which Boyd contributed an erotic fiction about liquid PVC and a horror story in zero gravity, that were awarded the Foundation Prince Pierre of Monaco Prix International for Creative Critical Thinking. Boyd's 'A Theory for the Strange-Girl: Raw Red Text', is a cult corporeal manifesto distributed by COUNTRY MUSIC at club nights, that has been manifested in sound by Yantan Ministry and at various venues including underwater at Vårberg public pool, Stockholm, by P0\$\$€. Their poetry and essays have also been published by Extra Extra, Canal, After Us and Afterall, among others. Exhibitions, performances and airings include ICA, The Horse Hospital, The Sunday Painter, Live Art Development Agency, 'ULTIMATE FANTASIES' at Guest Projects, London; 'DEATH DRIVE' at Outer Space, Australia; ilyd and Montez Press Radio. They have taught, given talks and workshops at Royal College of Art, University of Leeds, and Yorkshire Sculpture International, Aalto University, Helsinki and Open Doors LGBTQAP+ Youth Service, Australia. Since 2017 Boyd has been co-organiser of SHELL LIKE with Amy Lay-Pettifer, creating deep listening events and text commissions in sound. Most recently together they exhibited a new audio work at Liverpool Biennial 2021.



# Ingrid Haug Erstad & Abi Mitchell in conversation



Figure 1. Recenter, 2021, Joey Yu.

Ingrid Haug Erstad, Director, Bergen Assembly

Abi Mitchell, Assistant Curator, Liverpool Biennial

As part of a European collaborations project in which Bergen Assembly and Liverpool Biennial participated in December 2020, Ingrid Haug Erstad and Abi Mitchell were set up on a collegial blind date of sorts to discuss planning a festival during a pandemic.

Mitchell is Assistant Curator for Liverpool Biennial, a festival that was scheduled to open at two different times in 2020 and finally took place from March 2021 under strict distancing measures. She started working on the Biennial in March 2020, but was only able to work in the office with her colleagues for two days; the next ten months were spent working from home. Haug Erstad is Director of Bergen Assembly – a triennial in Bergen, Norway, which is planning its 2022 edition.

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IHE: Maybe we could start by talking about audiences. You were explaining last time we spoke how your thinking on this has shifted. Usually, it seems obvious that what we should do is to try to get as many people as possible to come to our events, but now that doesn't feel like the responsible thing to do.

AM: That's exactly what we're thinking. And there have been so many things to think about, with postponing and then trying to reschedule. With a Biennial, like you say, you usually try to encourage as many visitors as possible, but we think it's irresponsible to encourage visits. Also, at this moment we're completely unsure what opening will actually look like. We've been talking about refocusing and looking to bring audiences in during the closing weeks instead of the opening weeks – centring around a celebration at the end rather than at the beginning. But again, we don't know if that can happen either. Like you say, it's usually a case of how many people can we get, how many different events can we host etc? And now we're

really looking at the balance between a safe, socially distanced number of people and the question of whether, if we can only safely have six people in the audience, we should be looking at an alternative format for that event.

IHE: It feels like some sort of new language has developed out of the pandemic: 'refocusing', 'recentering', 'rethinking'.

AM: Yes, definitely. An example of this is that early on, the festival was going to have three highlight weekends, which would have been key moments to bring in audiences, and they would have had different focuses. But with the shortened time and all the COVID restrictions, this went out of the window. There was a process of revising, then realignment and refocusing for the public programme as a whole within the new restrictions.

IHE: I'm not having to respond quickly all the time in the same way as I did before, so I'm looking from afar at other biennials and cultural institutions managing programmes over the last year. And that's one of the things that I've tried to think about in our institution: how counting audience numbers and visits is useful and fine, and is such an important way of communicating to politicians what we're doing, but it can become too important. I'm thinking about finding different languages to explain what we're doing and also to talk about the quality or depth or type of interaction people have. I think our strengths shouldn't necessarily be measured only in the number of people we can reach, but also in the type of meetings they have. So I'm wondering if this could be a chance for biennials to be allowed to focus on smaller groups. Sometimes you feel that you're not really making choices in that way – you're kind of reacting instead of acting.

AM: Yes, that's true. We definitely felt we were reacting rather than acting, and when all these different influencing and changing factors are coming at you, it just becomes a confusing mess! Then what you need to do is step back and think logically, and act on it, rather than just constantly struggling with all these different things that mean that the event you're trying to put on has morphed into something very different.

January might be another period of revision. We've got ideas for all these really exciting events, but how can we plan them until we know what the restrictions will be? How to put them together in a way that's not just reactive to COVID?

IHE: I'm also interested in whether our funders and the public will go along with the fact that culture is important even if you can't reach 40,000 people in your opening weekend. And that you can be ambitious even if you're not reaching so many people.

AM: I think we also need to accept that ourselves. I joined the festival late, but the wider team had already been planning the festival for nearly two years. They had in their minds this picture of what it was going to be, like the previous biennials, reaching so many people, having so many events, having a big opening party etc. So if it doesn't happen like that, then it's disappointing. I think what we need to do is admit to ourselves that it's not just happening to us, but to everyone, in different ways. If we can still present something and it's the best thing that we can present within the current times, within the current guidelines, then we should be thankful that we have produced it. So, yes, I think a bit of self-reflection is key, and telling ourselves as a team: 'It's OK. We know there'll be fewer people than usual, but that's the way it is.'

IHE: Yes. You have to sort of refocus away from this opening moment. We have to remember that with Bergen Assembly, the opening weekend is very important for the professionals, for the participants, for an international audience of visiting art professionals, but for the local audience, the opening weekend isn't necessarily the most important. It's a moment when we get some attention, and we reach a larger audience. The local audience know that it's open, but they're not the ones who are rushing there for the press conference and for the parties. The situation is forcing us to focus on the everyday life of the biennial rather than the beginning. I think we've all experienced that week after the opening weekend, when your

whole team is a bit dead and you're not able to keep going. So maybe it's also healthy to spread out that focus, as you say.

AM: Obviously many organisations are doing a lot of digital work at the moment and will probably have to continue to do so through next year. What we see there is a positive change, meaning that we have more time and resources to put towards making the final outcome as accessible as possible to local, national and international audiences. We'd be doing a lot of these things anyway, but this has really brought home a focus on widening that out. If people can't visit easily, how can we improve on that, whether it's in person or through a wider digital offer? We have to offer digital for everyone, but can we also do this in more targeted ways to make sure that the offer is as wide as possible? So that's been quite positive: it's given us the opportunity to think around that a lot more. Normally, you'd just be making sure that your standard stuff is in place. This time, we've been able to broaden that out quite a bit, which is one good thing that's come out of this period.

IHE: Are you thinking about different ways of distributing materials?

AM: Yes, definitely. A lot of museums have removed print materials from their spaces because they were acting as a touch point, with people repeatedly touching the same places. So things like hand-outs and leaflets, guides and maps have been removed. So then we were thinking about how we can still have people access that material, because they'll still need the information, but how do we disseminate it? And some of it will be really simple. We'll make sure that the PDF or the downloadable version works. And then we've been talking about how we can integrate into the city and into the venues more, so it's much easier to follow signage to find the venue. This will be much more important if you don't have as many printed maps. And we're looking at doing these really nice digital walk-throughs. I'm not entirely sure how they work, but it's quite a nice idea that you can still journey through an exhibition rather than just seeing a slideshow of images. Again, some of these are things that other places are already doing, but normally they'd have been at the bottom of our list.

IHE: The Gothenburg International Biennial print quite a nice newspaper, and I think they disseminate it through a local newspaper. That's something that we've thought about before too, because then you reach people directly and it's not a touch point. But it's probably quite expensive.

AM: Yes, we're looking at doing something with the Liverpool Echo, which is the local newspaper. I think that's a really nice way of connecting with your local community. My parents, for example, always buy their local paper, so if a festival appeared in the Yorkshire Post, they'd see it. But if it's a map in a gallery, then they probably wouldn't ever see it. And it's again, a way of engaging with the audiences that might have been on your list before, but that you haven't had time to do. It's much more important now, which is great.

IHE: Yes, you're right. That's really interesting to hear. And also, the digital exhibition tour. Are there are any particular examples you thought were really good?

AM: FACT in Liverpool have done a really great one, and The Tetley in Leeds comes to mind too. They've received really good feedback and the take-up has been quite a lot higher than they anticipated, with that a lot more people using it as a resource than they imagined.

IHE: I've heard similar things from the Berlin Biennial about their guided digital tours. I actually haven't seen it, but I think it's guided tours with the curators. They've also said that the interest has been a lot bigger than they thought it would be. And that a lot of companies that used to come on study trips have asked, could we have a digital tour? So that would be a combination of a meeting with a curator and looking at the digital content, which sounds quite nice. I think we should both be checking out what they did.

And I also really liked this exhibition that Anselm Franke curated many years ago called Animism. They've made a digital version of it on *efflux*. It's a combination of audio readings, clips of video works, images of archives and stills, and a text. You can read it and listen at the same time and kind of go through

the exhibition. And I thought that was really nice. But I've heard from someone else that they felt it was like one of these CD-ROM games, very old, like a really old school type of game. It's a combination of an audio book and a book, and I was quite intrigued by that. I like the audio part of it, so you kind of hear someone narrating what you're looking at.

Although I feel like a lot of us keep saying, 'Oh, I don't want any more digital content; I'm so tired of online conferences', there are still lots of instances where I get inspired and I feel like people are using different media in new ways. So it's also important to think about that. It's also important that people keep working. It's a way to keep having exchanges with people.

AM: It seems that people's feelings go up and down, that it's a real ebb and flow. At the beginning it was new and it was like, 'Oh, I can go to all these events.' And then you say, 'I'm fed up just looking at my screen', but then you come back again and you're like, 'Well, I can still go to this webinar that's taking place in America, which I would never have been able to go to before.' But if we just stopped making the work, then what would we do?

IHE: You're right. We still need to have exchanges and input and learn new things. It's impossible to just sit down and wait for this to pass.

AM: Exactly. We were having a bit of a rough time before Christmas, because we still didn't really know if we could set the opening date. But like I said earlier on, even if we don't know if we can open in March, we can't just stop. That's completely out of the question. So you still have to push forward and hope that you'll be open at some point. You need to accept that it's going to be like this for a while.

IHE: Maybe we could talk about this timeline question, and the idea of furlough, because I've been thinking about this quite a lot for my organisation. I realised that there are so many things that I haven't thought about, like types of insurances you can have for your staff members, or, for example, if someone gets sick, how long they're paid the full wage. We have good systems in Norway, but there's still so much potential for us as an organisation to really plan for this, and that should be part of the way we think. With a biennial, we have to carefully calculate every penny and every bit of energy we spend. There's an expectation to have this big momentum. So now I think that it's kind of irresponsible to plan in that way, but I also don't know how I'm going to communicate that or how I'm going to strategise together with our curators, who, of course are ambitious on behalf of their project or on behalf of the artists. Are you also thinking about this kind of energy?

AM: We're definitely thinking about it. When I started in my post in March, it was just before the lockdown. So at that point, we were still planning on opening in July of this year [2020] and having the normal run time. That would have been in four months' time, so everyone was in production mode and gearing up for the installation. And then, obviously, everything changed really, really quickly. It was a sudden stop, so it was quite hard to process on a personal level. And then there was a long pause over the summer when – I wouldn't say the pandemic was at its worst because it's obviously still very bad now – but over that period I was very much focused on the news and lockdown. So obviously we weren't producing during that time. It was impossible. It was a kind of in-between time where we were still having to plan, but also not able to plan, which was very strange. And then it suddenly all picked up again in September as everyone realised that to install in March, we'd have to ship in January, which meant we'd need to be finished in December, before Christmas. So then we were like, 'Oh no, we've got three months to pull it back together again!' So you've got like this up and down the mountain, which is really unusual for the festival, where usually you kind of ramp up and then you have a quiet period and then you pick up again for closing the install and evaluation. So it's really been pulled apart and put back together over this extended period. The circumstances are quite tricky – managing your relationships, your production schedules and your budget. And it all gets quite messy. And then on a personal level, all the staff are kind of up and down and stressed.

IHE: Yes. You're denied that great feeling at the opening when you feel you've accomplished

something, you've finished something, and you walk around and you can say, 'Really great job', and you can be pleased and relieved and celebrate and be happy.

AM: You're really looking forward to that moment. So if that moment is, taken away, it's quite hard to process the next step.

IHE: I know, it's really difficult. And some people who've worked on the event never even get to be part of finishing it, which is really frustrating. In my career before, I combined working on curatorial projects and working in cooking, and I always said that I really appreciated having a side gig where the timelines are shorter and you get this more immediate pay-off. Every day in the kitchen you have that moment, with every service, where you've accomplished something. And especially catering bigger events, where you're maybe doing an event a week, you have this rhythm sort of condensed into a week where you meet the other people you're working with. You look at the produce, you make a decision and you cook it. People eat and they're happy. And then you have a beer, right? But in the arts it's so much more stretched out. And sometimes you just have to celebrate the smaller moments: OK, we've handed everything in, we've set our schedule and our programme.

AM: That's a great suggestion. If you celebrate the small wins in the lead-up you're not putting as much pressure on yourself. And then you have those moments of positivity rather than just the continual stress and pressure.

IHE: I haven't thought about it until now, but this is something that's definitely interesting to reflect on.

AM: It's such a great suggestion, and it's often the simplest things that get overlooked but have the greatest impact. You're then punctuating that timeline with these moments where you can reflect and be positive. Because really at the end of the day, it's all the small things that make up that one big thing. So we should celebrate these smaller achievements.

IHE: I also think that we're quite good at being critical of what we're doing in our organisations and sometimes I really want to ask people to just give positive feedback, because we're so good at bashing ourselves for not doing this or that. And that's where the audience comes in. Then we can be proud of what the artist did or the curator did. I think it's actually quite important that we sometimes say 'Look at what we've done' and exchange the positive responses.

AM: These are great suggestions. I'm going to feed these back to my team.

IHE: That's nice. I'm so happy to talk to you. I feel like I'm learning a lot from hearing about your processes.

AM: I was just thinking the same thing!

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### Ingrid Haug Erstad and Abi Mitchell

Ingrid Haug Erstad is director of Bergen Assembly, a triennial for contemporary art that takes place in the city of Bergen. Haug Erstad has a background as curator of Bergen Kunsthall's projects space, Landmark, and later moved on to work as a freelance curator, initiating Multiplex, a curatorial platform devoted to artist's films and moving image in Berlin, and collaborating and assisting projects such as Time/bank (New York and Moscow) by E-flux and Agency of Unrealised Projects at DAAD galerie (Berlin).

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.



# 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.

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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.

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### 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.

# Barbara Campaner and Gregor Dražil in conversation



Figure 1. Revision, 2021, Joey Yu.

Barbara Campaner, Art Educator (Freelance), Berlin Biennial

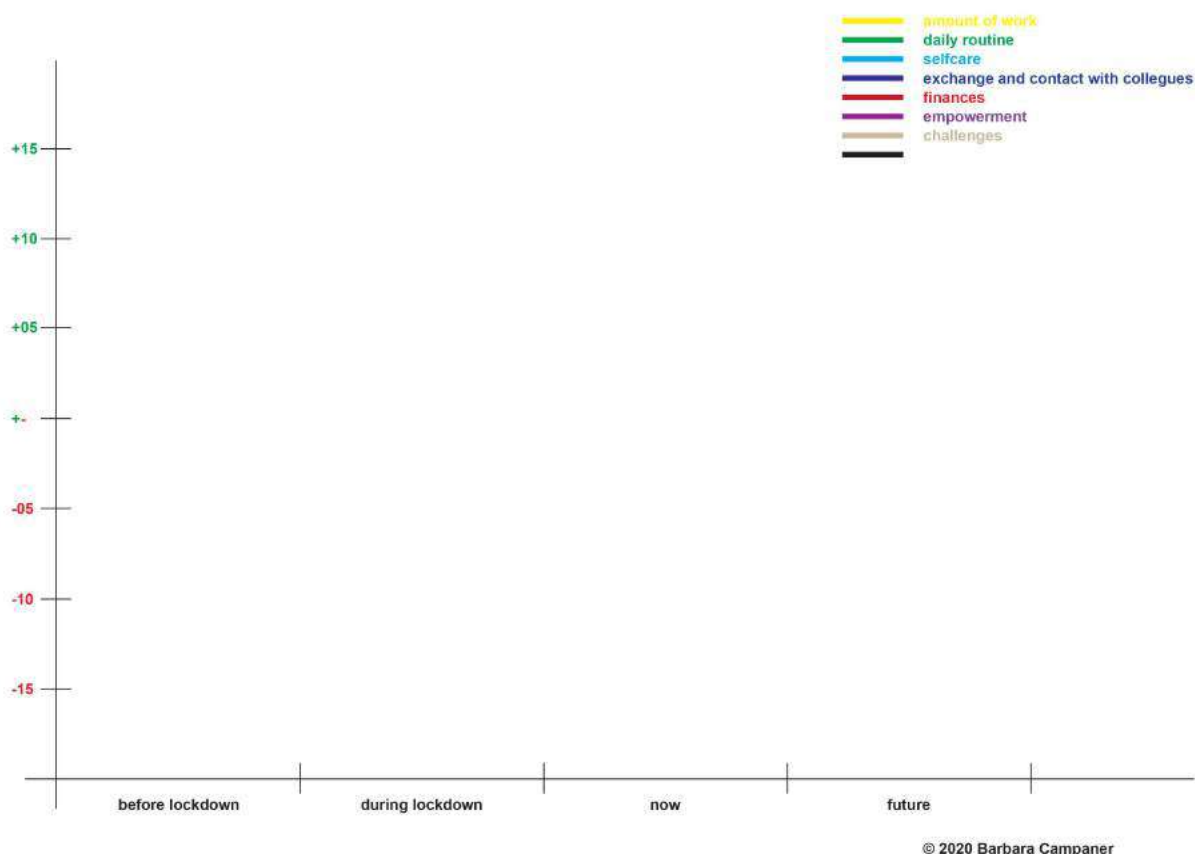
Gregor Dražil, Curator, Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts

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.

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### **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.

# Anastasia Blokhina and Stacy Brafield in conversation



Figure 1. Rebalance, 2021, Joey Yu.

Anastasia Blokhina, Executive Director, Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art

Stacy Brafield, Education and Mediation, Bergen Assembly (2019)

RIBOCA2: and suddenly it all blossoms, curated by Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, took place from May to October 2020, the Biennial adapted in to a feature film of recorded footage of exhibitions and a series of online discussions. Bergen Assembly takes place every three years and the next edition is due to open in September 2022.

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AB: Do you do panic, or stay calm and keep going in a pandemic?

SB: To stay calm and keep on going is the most sensible thing to do, if one has the capacity to do so. Panicking in any situation has the potential to cause harm. How to keep on going is a good question, though. It could be broken into four different variables: do you panic and keep going, do you panic and stop, do you stay calm and keep going, or stay calm and stop? Personally, I think now is the time to slow down, to reflect, evaluate and to read the moment. So, stay calm and move slowly and very carefully is my answer. We currently live in a time where we think much more in a short-term manner and everything is provisional.

I remember when we last spoke, you mentioned that you've changed the ways in which you plan, from long-term to shorter evaluative hurdles. I think the smaller hurdles are crucial right now, for taking care of ourselves, our organisations/institutions and the people we work with. We have to loosen our expectations and be much more adaptable than before, and we have to learn this new way of working whilst navigating slowly and carefully through a pandemic.

Over to you: what are your thoughts on panicking or staying calm and keeping moving?

AB: Well, obviously, panic is counterproductive and considering none of us can do anything about the current situation, basically you need to keep going as far as you can. But you're not just keeping going on your own. You keep going with an institution and there are other people who depend on your decisions. One of the most important dimensions for me was the extreme social responsibility, because your decisions have consequences. Whether you decide to go on in full, for example, with an event, or to do it online, is hard to decide. And there are environmental implications in terms of the data. I think it multiplied about ten times the average data and for all of this you need data centres, and you need to be careful. The internet isn't endless, and it doesn't exist in a bubble that's not connected to the real world. So we should be mindful about the amount of data we use as well.

But the so-called safety of the online space is obviously very seductive compared with events in real time, because even if you pursue all the safety measures, even if everyone is within a safe distance and wearing a mask, you're still responsible. What if someone still gets it? And this social responsibility of 2020 is, I think, something that I'll remember in twenty years from now. Every decision needs to be evaluated, not only from the perspective of your institution, but from the perspective of the economy, because we do keep the economy going with what we do. But there are also consequences that are bigger than you and bigger than an exchange. So we went fully online with the public programme, and that was a good decision, but we still went with the actual on-site show because the space was so vast that you could self-isolate. For those who didn't want to come, we had a video tour. The governmental rules can't be the only ones you follow, because you still need to think about other people, and to what extent you want to endanger them by pursuing a physical activity, a physical gathering, or if you want to be in a safe online space. This is a dimension that I find extremely important.

What's also important not to forget is the need for culture, for knowledge. This is something that has always been there during the toughest times in the world. This one will be no exception. We need to learn how to navigate all the new dimensions. For example, the remote work is obviously something that's going to stay with us long after the pandemic is gone, but there should be a healthy balance between what could have been an email, what could have been a Zoom call, and what should be a real meeting. So I guess at the end of the day, we're just going to have to prioritise. Because the intercultural exchange should and will continue. It's just that we're going to be more responsible in terms of how we conduct it. There's a long, ongoing discussion of sustainability in the art world as a travel-dependent industry. This is a time when we should evaluate it forcefully. And maybe that's the outer force that needed to be brought into this conversation. You can't go to Dubai, Hong Kong, São Paulo to see three shows. You should choose one destination and explore the region and think about not only your own health, but also the carbon footprint and environmental aspects of your travel. This isn't necessarily bad. I think it's the time for all of us to reflect and to restructure our lives.

SB: If we take this situation we're in right now as an example, before the pandemic it would have been second nature for us to meet in person, to host the exchange face to face, but here we are today, talking through a screen. I think the fact that society is forced to consider the importance of travel today is a very serious curve in human behaviour. Society now has to take into account the potential danger of being a carrier of a life-threatening virus amongst other factors when deciding on whether or not to travel.

I do miss the physicality of meeting people in person though, and I feel quite uncomfortable having digital conversations. In the summer, I participated in a month-long artists-at-home residency, where all of the communication and exchanges were online. The digital conversations created quite high levels of anxiety. Meeting people for the first time and building relationships in the digital sphere is something completely new for me, and for many others I imagine. It was a steep learning curve!

We're learning in the moment; we're learning through doing. But, where are we looking to find help along the way? Are there specific models? How much of the programme do we move online, and how much do we cancel? What are the questions we're answering when we're making these considerations?

You moved the public programme for Riga Biennial online, but invited the public to experience the exhibition physically. Can you tell me a bit more about this process?

AB: When we had to make a decision about the postponing of the opening of the Riga Biennial from mid-May, we had three scenarios, and one of them was that we wouldn't be open to the public at all, and then we'd just film the movie. So we still build a show, and we film the movie, and that's it, if we're not allowed to let the public in. Or we were going to let two people in by appointment. But eventually, we were lucky to be able to let people in without too many restrictions, just with some cautiousness. But no-one could predict this in mid-March.

Pre-pandemic we designed a beautiful programme and invited speakers from different countries, a lot of them from US. The list of names included Sophie Lewis, Federico Campagna, Astrida Neimanis, CA Conrad and many more. When the lockdowns started, it became obvious that we couldn't bring in people from abroad. So we decided to move the programme fully online. It took us a few weeks to find the film crew, set up all the editing and transcribing and we started to release one video a week. The first one marked the original date of the opening of the biennial in mid-May. When we were finally able to open, we decided that the public program would be screened on the premises of the biennial and we had a few Q&As with local speakers in a mixed format – the international speaker was on Zoom and the local audience in the exhibition hall. That was an interesting experience. The main outcome of this situation is that we'll most likely continue to do lectures online, streaming them from the exhibition halls in 2022.

SB: I think it's important to reflect on how moving such programmes online broadens the accessibility and inclusivity for those who wouldn't have had the opportunity to experience them for mental, physical or geographical reasons. This space that has been created needs to be held and not forgotten as we navigate back into physical happenings and encounters. Accessibility and inclusivity should always be a main factor in decision making and never secondary. I felt that this year's Biennial in Riga created a balance of the online and the physical. Balance is essential.

AB: Yes. And in terms of inclusivity, we've had the subtitles burned into the film in three languages: English, Latin and Russian. This is something that's very important, not only for different nationalities, but also for non-hearing people. That's a level of inclusivity that we never achieved before.

I completely agree about the balance. It's a balance between inclusivity, social responsibility, and still having an experience, because we can't move all life online. You need to interact with the arts in a physical space. That's how it's always been and how it always will be. That's why people travel to see the original painting, because obviously they can look at it online, but that's a different experience. Humanity has so much adaptivity, and obviously we'll adapt to this situation as well, eventually. It's just that the adaptation is going to be a result of what we put into this process.

SB: I completely agree.

AB: There's no way we can plan long-term now, so the only thing we can do is to plan short-term.

SB: Yes, and be receptive or reactive or adaptive.

AB: For sure. Reactive and flexible, and we need to very thoroughly understand where our interests and principles lie, and how to find the balance between fulfilling our goals, not endangering others, while still delivering what we want to do and what we can achieve at this particular moment.

SB: Is the movie still on schedule for the same time frame? Let's say you weren't able to invite the public in physically – was the movie going to be produced more quickly or within the same timeframe?

AB: Within the same timeframe. We needed twenty filming days, so we opened for three weeks, and then we had two months for the post production. It's going to be released at the beginning of next year at one of the festivals. If no one had been able to see the exhibition, we might have released the movie earlier, online or somewhere else. But now we're going to release it next year and that's going to be a very good opportunity for everyone who couldn't join us in Riga to see the exhibition. So it's the most well-documented show in history!

SB: Now that you've had the opportunity to invite the public into the exhibition, does this have any effect on the film? Is the same effort still going into documenting the exhibition on film? And how has the experience been?

AB: Well, we normally document everything that's going on. Would we build it into a movie? Maybe not. But we do document it with photos and videos. So we pay a lot of attention to it, because in a digital world, this is something that gives you endless opportunities. But maybe not with the effort of a full-swing feature movie.

What about you? What kind of decisions did you make in all of your different jobs and activities?

SB: I've been slowly working on several projects and nurturing a new artist-run space called aerial. aerial was planned to open to the public in spring but we quickly switched our focus inwards rather than outwards, into making the space a sanctuary for ourselves during this precarious time: slowly renovating the space, applying for funding for the programme and accessibility of the space. The development has been very slow and reflective and I really appreciate that: making solid foundations for the future rather than running before we've started to crawl. I thrive on productivity and being active, so this slow process has been quite a testing yet renewing experience.

In the beginning of 2020, I started working on a project with Festspillkollektivet, Bergen Kunsthall and Ytre Arna refugee centre, where together with the residents we were going to design and make a green social space where people would spend time growing produce and cooking together. Unfortunately, the project was postponed. In the summer, we found out that the refugee centre will close in December 2020, which came as sad news. I'm now at a stage of not knowing exactly what to do regarding the fee, as I've spent a lot of time researching and developing the project, but we haven't actualised anything.

AB: It's the responsibility of the institutions. When we were asking our artists to make the social-media contributions for us, we had a small fee, because it's the time you put in, it's your work and this is your source of income. I think every institution will have to find a balance between realising the project and remembering why your institution exists. It exists because of the artists.

SB: Exactly, thank you for reminding me of that. That's important.

AB: I'm encouraging you big time to ask for your fee. These are very uncertain times when we all just have to be human. And we need to think about people who depend on us, people whom we can help. There's no way we're getting through this without thinking of each other. There have been a lot of good examples lately during the pandemic, but also lots of bad examples. So this is something that needs to be a normal practice without the pandemic. If you want artists to do something, there will be a fee involved. You don't ask for people to give you food for free, or to give you a haircut for free. So you pay your sub-contractors and you pay for the services. And it should be a rule for every institution. Obviously, many labours of love happen in the arts, where people just want to produce something together and they don't have a budget, and they agree that they're going to work pro bono. But that should be an exception. If you're an institution with a budget, there's always something you could do, whatever the budget is. It doesn't have to be enormous. It just depends on how you look at it and how you perceive the workforce and how you perceive the artists. Every institution needs to base their activities on respect. So if you have a budget for six projects and none of them has an artist fee, make five projects and the budget of the sixth goes to the artist, because you should have calculated it this way from the very beginning.

SB: These are important morals to have as a grounding.

AB: Yes, it's just the way you do things in 2020.

SB: For today's conversation we decided that we'd each share advice with one another. In preparation, I asked Form Class, a group of artists, thinkers, curators, designers and cultural managers, what advice or experience are you holding on to right now, when working within the pandemic? The discussion with Form Class was focused around the importance of reflecting and how we should slow down whilst reflecting and learn from the changes, the adaptations we've made. We should be making



thorough reflections on the recent past for the present. When we're moving slowly forward, we need to do so with care and sensitivity.

AB: Yes, that's for sure. And you're reflecting on something that's in one way an achievement, and it's a breakthrough, because you've managed to make something happen, despite all the circumstances. But all of your usual ways of measuring success are no longer there, starting from, for example the number of visitors. We had 55,000 in 2018 within five months, and we had 21,000 within three weeks. But do these numbers reflect the fact that we're now better known, or that our education programme was so good in the inter-biennial period that it made people come? Probably not entirely, because everyone was in the city, and everyone was bored. There wasn't much happening, so people came. It's not because it's a bad show or a good show. And the current circumstances give a completely different dimension to your reflections. You can't reflect the way you used to reflect. We're all talking about the 'new normal' because we don't know what's going to happen in 2022. That means that you're also reflecting on the future, wondering whether you'll be able to do what you started doing before the pandemic. Will the international show be something that people will travel to? Will you be able to do research and invite artists and everything else? It's a very different kind of reflection this year.

We're now in the middle of finishing the analysis and the survey of the visitors, of the artists etc. I think these results are going to be really interesting because on one side, you just feel like you're fighting the circumstances. On the other side, you wonder, will I still be able to do that in 2022? Not to mention that this year, everything was changing three times a day.

In terms of advice, and if we think about the lessons that we got from the pandemic, my biggest lesson is that people still need culture. My second lesson is that you can't really plan anything in the circumstances without exhausting the team and going completely crazy yourself. In a way, the biggest lesson was just to go with the flow. I've learned to feel comfortable about missing deadlines because there's nothing I can do.

SB: I think that's a really interesting point, to be comfortable with missing a deadline, or failing to meet an expectation. This feeling of being comfortable within a state of failure is a very new one. The focus has switched from meeting deadlines and expectations to practices of care. I think that's a huge learning curve for most people.

I'm curious about what the normal model of reflection is for the Riga Biennial and how this changed due to the pandemic.

AB: The evaluation model hasn't changed too much. We had plans to get a professional agency to evaluate the show, which couldn't happen because we didn't know whether there would be an audience to ask about the biennial, or whether there would be funding for it. But the process of self-criticism and learning from our mistakes didn't change. It just became even more important to do that, because you're now writing your future history. If you don't reflect on what happened this year and you don't document it, you might make the same mistakes again.

I think we all agree that the world has changed and when we all finally go back to normal, it's going to be a different normal. It's crucially important now to reflect on everything as much as you can and to document it because it's going to be the basis of really interesting research for the future. For example, most likely, we're going to do the public program online all the time, with the physical presence in Riga as well, but also broadcasting the videos online. Because this way you create a really good repository of knowledge, and you can reach a wider audience. That's lesson number one, and there will be lots of other lessons. For example, if one artist is coming from Latin America to Europe, rather than flying from Argentina to Riga for a week, it should be planned that they visit other European destinations over several weeks. So cooperation and co-production between different institutions is also becoming very important.

What I also find interesting in terms of giving advice, or maybe seeking advice, is the discussion of how people coped with this situation mentally. Not only COVID itself impacts on mental health, but the

mental health implications after the lockdowns is worth discussing. Mental health now needs to be really well taken care of. If I were in the government, I'd include mental care in the insurance policies, because the majority of our problems now come from here, not even just this year, but over the last twenty, thirty, forty years. Of course, this year was a drastic change to a lot of people, and they need help. They might not even understand that they need help, but they do need it.

This second wave, the autumn/winter one, is for me much more exhausting and uncomfortable. Obviously, that might have to do with the region – as you know, in our region, it's dark at 3:00. But how do we find something to hold on to? You don't see people, you don't go to work, you don't see exhibitions. You don't do anything that you used to do, and where do we find the resources to cope in these circumstances? Do you have any ideas on that?

SB: I think the difference between the first and the following lockdown is the element of hope. In the first lockdown, we went into the complete unknown, thinking it was temporary. Now, after multiple lockdowns with varying strengths of restrictions, we're living in a new time, a time that's precarious.

Days are short here in Bergen too and it's important to stay active in our minds and bodies. On the south side of the peninsula that protrudes out from Bergen city centre, there's an outdoor swimming pool, with a sauna and steps down into the sea. The swimming pool, the cold water swims, have played a large part in my own personal wellbeing during these precarious times.

AB: Flexibility and adjusting your expectations is important. I was planning to spend these weeks somewhere in Southeast Asia, because this is what I normally do after we've finished the biennial. I go for a long vacation, somewhere really far away. Now I can't do that. You just try to find some small things around you that give you hope. To me, it's a lot of reading, because I finally have time to read – and cooking. Everyone cooks now. It's the new black. It's so funny, all of the conversations are revolving around cooking and recipes. People who couldn't fry an egg a year ago are now baking cakes. What I'm wondering is, how long will that be enough? How long can you hold on to cooking? Instead of cooking, you maybe need to start creating something new. Like you mentioned, people are adaptable, can regroup and rethink, and start doing something new. I'm just wondering when this moment will happen, because obviously as a humanity, we've been on a sprint, not a marathon for the last ten years. I'm interested, in an anthropological sense, in whether we're going to go back to the old life. For example, as someone who visited two countries within three weeks, I have to tell you that travelling isn't worth the amount of stress that you put yourself through. Spending a flight in a mask is challenging, but you're not going to die from it, but the amount of stress you put on yourself when you sneeze and you're like, 'Okay, I'm infected and I'm visiting my family, so I might have brought the virus to them.' The whole build-up of conditions, of factors, of things to consider is becoming a bit overwhelming.

I'm starting to doubt that there's going to be a point when everyone's vaccinated and everything's back to normal. First of all, it's not going to be back to normal because of the number of people who died through the pandemic. It's horrible. Half a million people were lost to COVID. But also, how easy will it be to run a business, like a small bar, or a gallery, or to be an artist? A lot of them are getting jobs now because they don't have shows. What's the world we're living in going to be like when we come out of the final lockdown?

SB: Are you planning for future vacations now? Or would you rather go with the flow and book last minute?

AB: Vaccination is on the way. I think I'm going to do that, because it looks like that's going to be your passport to the life you had before, not to mention dealing with the fear. I know some people who went for vacations to Mexico and Indonesia this year, which I couldn't because of the movie. The deadline to finish it is the end of January. That means I'm working. Technically my office is closed until 11 January, and all of my employees are technically on vacation, but everyone's working here and there because, first of all, there's not much else to do. This whole idea of remote working has completely changed the perception of

time off. It's taken away freedom because work life, home life, free time, work time is all blurred. After we go back to normal, it's going to be a big adaptive period of putting our work life back where it belongs, and I foresee this as a big challenge – one of the biggest actually: to identify which parts of your life can be done online, and which parts need to go back to physical space. You're going to have a different perception of your life, of your schedule, of your home, and of your office. A lot of people actually feel comfortable with working from home, especially those who have families, or have a long commute to work. It's going to be interesting to observe the working culture after that.

SB: Yes, one of the potential countering factors will be that people who've benefited from remote working will have the opportunity to question the physical meeting and the necessity of it.

AB: And of live events. A lecture, for example, can be given through Zoom, but a panel, where you need to have an exchange obviously needs to happen offline. I'm looking forward to traveling again, because one of the very important parts of my job is seeing things. This is where I draw my inspiration and I take tips from here and there. If that's taken away, it's going to be really difficult to continue, not to mention the networking, because phone conversations and Zooms are great, but you can't really develop a relationship through Zoom. Not yet. Maybe in ten or fifteen years, all life will happen on Zoom, which is a horrendous idea.

If that moment comes when the world is free again, everyone's going to be pretty obsessed with physical meetings, and then we'll find a balance between online exchanges and physical presence. I don't think we're going to go back to this crazy travel, where you go to New York for twenty-four hours to give a lecture. It's going to be more thoughtful and considerate.

SB: I totally agree. We have to hold on to key ethics!

AB: If we sum up the conversation we've had, you can see some positive effects of the pandemic. You can now sit and reflect on the situation that was absolutely out of your control. You learn to live a new life, which is hopefully not a forever new life, and the main point of reflecting now is to learn lessons and make the best practices, avoiding the bad things and carrying forward the good things of lockdown.

SB: It is going to take some time, but in a few years we'll be able to look back on the effects, once we have a little distance. For now, it's important to start to prepare ourselves and understand our expectations of the future. It won't be the same as it was before, so let's find the important elements from the present to take with us into the future.

AB: I think that's a beautiful closing statement.

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### **Anastasia Blokhina and Stacy Brafield**

Anastasia Blokhina studied Journalism and Communication at St Petersburg State University and graduated with honours. She is an experienced cultural producer known for her work delivering large-scale visual arts projects across the world, within the museum, commercial and not-for-profit sectors. From 2011 to 2014 she was Director of External Communications at Erarta Museum and Galleries of Contemporary Art, the biggest contemporary art museum in Russia, with an outreach of galleries in St Petersburg, New York, London, Zurich and Hong Kong. At Erarta, she was involved in the development of the whole organisation from both the cultural and business side. From 2014 to 2016, she was Director of YAY Gallery in Baku, Azerbaijan, part of the Yarat foundation. While in this role she worked on various local and international projects and organised exhibitions in New Delhi, Rome, Moscow, Perm, Dubai, Sharjah and Paris. She worked with venues such as the Old Sorting Office and organisations including the Louise Blouin Foundation in London, UK, and the Leila Heller gallery in New York. Blokhina was also involved in Yarat's project The Union of Fire and Water at Palazzo Barbaro at the 56th Venice Biennale.

Blokhina brings her international experience in project management, external relations and working with artists to the Riga Biennial, for which she is responsible for managing and directing all operations. She lives and works in Riga.

Stacy Brafield (she/her) is an artist born in Suffolk, raised in the Lake District, and based in Bergen. She graduated with an MA in Fine Arts from Bergen Academy of Art in 2014. Within her practice, Brafield explores human relations and forms of everyday interaction in society. She is influenced by the rhythms and values of everyday life and her motivation is to reflect these back to society in a poetic way. Exploring the realities that often go unnoticed in public space, her work provides a space for the overlooked. Works respond to the environment and are formed in community projects, drawing, installation, performance, sound and text. Encouraging the audience to reflect upon society through participation, she is interested in the interactions and processes through which the individual and the whole are shaped.

Brafield co-founded the artist-run space aerial in 2020. Alongside her artistic practice she works with communication at Bergen Kunsthall and is currently coordinating a seminar programme for UKS' 100th birthday. She worked with the 2019 edition of Bergen Assembly, co-initiating the education and mediation programme. Since 2018, she has been working with the nomination committee for UKS and with the board for Hordaland Kunstsenter since 2019.

# Duygu Örs and Laima Rudusa in conversation



Figure 1. Re-enchantment, 2021, Joey Yu.

Duygu Örs, Education & Mediation Project Manager, Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art  
Laima Rudusa, General Coordinator, Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA)  
Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art's 11th edition, curated by María Berríos, Renata Cervetto, Lisette Lagnado, and Agustín Pérez Rubio, opened slowly over 2020 with an Epilogue opening in summer 2020. RIBOCA2: and suddenly it all blossoms, curated by Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, took place from May to October 2020, the Biennial adapted in to a feature film of recorded footage of exhibitions and a series of online discussions.

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DÖ: Could you explain your position, and what you've been working on this year?

LR: I've had multiple positions. We're a small team that obviously grows substantially during a biennial year, and thus some aspects are in flux. I was the Public Programme Coordinator this year – our biennial year – which had an entirely new spin, as the public programme went online, but I'm also a constant team-member for the partnerships and grants departments, and as of this month, I'm moving on to the General Coordinator role.

LR: Were you able to follow what RIBOCA was up to? I know you had your own biennial to organise.

DÖ: I actually couldn't follow anything this year. Maybe you can tell me a bit about it?

LR: Quite early on, we realised we needed to rethink how the biennial was going to manifest itself within the current situation. Our curator, Rebecca Lamarche Vadel, together with our founder and executive director (the trio of the managerial team) decided to turn the biennial into a feature-length film. We'd still have all the artworks, albeit rethought due to issues of logistics and shipping. Thus we envisioned still having the biennial installed, but as a three-week film set. It was only in the summer that



we realised that we could actually have it open to the public as well, and have an exhibition as a film set. We were lucky that a lot of the work was actually new commissions, and so we changed a lot of the commissions to be created locally. The work was in many ways minimised from the initial plans and dreams, but it was a reaction to the reality. Rebecca often said that COVID was her co-curator.

For the Public Programme, which I was working on, the original plan was set for the entirety of the five months of the biennial. We were supposed to have weekly lectures given by thinkers from across the world. In this case, we didn't see any other feasible way but to put it online. And so, as the coordinator, it became a fast-track process of filming, recording and editing a weekly video lecture for the same time period.

DÖ: Was it live recorded?

LR: There was actually a medley. So, the very first one we had was live with CA Conrad, a poet from New York, who tuned in and had a conversation together with the curator and the associate curator. The next ones were pre-recorded, consisting of a 45-minute lecture and a Q & A with the associate curator. We immediately realised we just didn't want the lectures to look like Zoom, even though Zoom is the aesthetic of today, so our designer created a very new look from the recordings featuring a pink frame and key quotes visualised.

The best outcome, however, is the permanence: they're still all there. It's actually wonderful research material for students and young scholars due to the scope of the subject matter and the stamina of the speakers. Now a large part of my role is working with the archive and partnering with academic institutions for this repository of knowledge.

DÖ: Through academic databases? That's a real opportunity in pandemic times. You have a totally different approach to archiving because a lot of things are produced in a way that can function as an archive. For example, the Berlin Biennale also had a lot of video works, which wasn't anticipated in the beginning, but since many artists couldn't do their projects as planned, or the works couldn't travel, digital formats were the only solution.

LR: It's often easier.

DÖ: It creates, of course, a totally different atmosphere. But in terms of archiving or documenting, it was easier, since the work itself functions as the documentation.

LR: Could you tell me about your role? I know you do mediation and actually work in two art organisations, right?

DÖ: Yes, I work for the Berlin Biennale and the KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Both are actually under one umbrella association that has two parts, called Kunst-Werke e. V. I switched from KW to the Biennial team, but from now on I'm in both teams. It's the first time that there's been such a position. It was a step made in order to think of the mediation and outreach work in a more sustainable way. Since the biennial is every two years, the mediation and outreach work always has to start as a new project. That's why we're trying to bring the teams of both organisations together and then think of mediation in the longer term, so that when the biennial takes place, we can make use of the networks of mediation work already tried and tested at KW. It's a sustainable vision for working with different networks beyond time-limited biennale projects.

LR: So are you currently in the creating stage?

DÖ: Yes. We'll be working from now on for the next Berlin Biennale. The idea started with this biennial. The curators didn't want mediation to be separated from the curatorial concept. Of course, it's easy to say this, but there are already existing structures in place that make it difficult. There's already a difference between the mediation programme and the public programme. I don't know how it is in your case, but also the people who work on mediation and on the public program have different approaches. So what we tried to do with this biennial was not to separate and sub-divide the public. Because the way that it's somehow organised is that there's a public that needs education and mediation, and there's a public

that can just come into a public program.

LR: How do you make that distinction in terms of the definition?

DÖ: We produced a lot of concept papers to give the whole team an idea of what this could actually mean. We named the programme 'Exchange Programme', which was an umbrella for the public programme and the mediation programme. The teams and departments are separate, but the idea was about the value or the place or representation that each of these departments usually get through communication. We tried to establish this way of thinking, considering what the audience sees as one thing. It's a process. This vision can't be achieved with one biennial. You have to think in this way from now on and for every upcoming biennial. You also have to think of not one existing public, but different publics that have different experiences and needs, and each of these is valid. So there should be a public programme that acknowledges that there are different publics and that we want to create a biennial for different publics coming together, where everybody has their different needs and different approaches to what we're doing.

DÖ: I think these are necessary steps that we all have to take. And I'm also thinking about the work that needs to be done for the next biennial, which starts now. For the next one, it would be very interesting for the team to come together in understanding the variety of approaches towards a public programme as a joint idea. At the 11th Berlin Biennale, I was always saying that we should have an honest approach to what our audience is. I think there's an illusion that you'll bring different people in and you have to cater to these people through the mediation or education department. But we thought, 'Okay, no, let's be honest. In pandemic times, it's a local biennial,' But what does a 'local biennial' mean if the only translation that you have is in English? For all the video works, there was only an English translation. This is something that I'd also like to know about in your case: how you did it? Because at the end it was too expensive to translate, for example, from Spanish into English and German. So most of the times, it is only translated into English. This is quite common in the arts.

LR: The organisation has made it a point from the beginning that everything that we do is in three languages.

DÖ: Perfect.

LR: Having everything in all three languages was never even disputed. This was also a huge part of the public programme, and every single one of our online series of talks and conversations has been translated into Latvian and Russian via subtitles. So, you'll go on YouTube and you click your language. Our video editors looked at the statistics of how many people put on the subtitles when they watch, and it's close to nothing, so they asked us 'Are you sure we need to put all this time and effort into making these subtitles?' But for us, it's not about the majority, it's about accessibility. Our institution put it down as a must.

DÖ: I think this is how it has to be. This is about taking care of our audiences or our potential audiences. We had for example German local press writing about the biennial in German, and then local people came and they just found English subtitles. Particularly in the age of COVID, it's a majority local audience. It's very contradictory to say that this was a local biennial if you only address a public that's fluent in English. As your case shows, it won't change from one day to the next, but it's about giving the right sign and making it accessible, making more people aware that the exhibitions of a biennial are for them, even if they don't speak English.

LR: So would your mediators do a translation job, in terms of tours?

DÖ: This year we did English and German tours on the weekends. And we also had tours in Spanish, Portuguese and in Turkish. We scheduled them on a regular basis and more people than we could accommodate wanted to attend. With the hygiene regulations, only six or seven people could join a tour.

LR: Do you think that was a positive aspect, that the tours were smaller?

DÖ: I think so, yes. But, the way it was organised was a bit difficult because of the hygiene

regulations. You had to write your name on a list when you entered, so it was on a first-come-first-served basis. Because the biennial was only open for eight weeks, in some cases, we couldn't accommodate the people who didn't make it on to the list. This was something that I learned for the next time: to create a system that's adaptable within the running period. But you can never make it perfect. Because with the system we worked with, we wanted to make it accessible, so people wouldn't have to book online spots to attend a tour. We thought this would be a more accessible system.

LR: You were saying that your biennial took place in between the two waves, but how did you feel the impact of COVID onsite, apart from these smaller tour groups?

DÖ: I personally think it was an opportunity, because it was a moment when you had to rethink the existing formats. For example, my focus is always to think about accessibility and the exclusivity of art spaces. I mean, even without COVID, I think not many local people would come to the biennial. Like many other contemporary art spaces, the Biennial is an exclusive space, a very specific setting. So my starting point is always to think of different publics. We did a lot of formats that happened unannounced. For example, a workshop that took place in a park and people don't even know that it was organised by the biennial. By unannounced, I mean, we didn't put it in a newsletter or on the homepage. Because by announcing this through your classical channels, you'll only get the 'newsletter people'. So we actually did a lot of things outside and with passers-by in a workshop situation. I think for mediation, the regulations that the pandemic brought up was also a kind of opportunity. Of course, when you do something outside, you have to take care of everyone involved. From those attending to the mediators, you have a responsibility. At the same time, you have to provide the mediators with opportunities to work. So it was a very tiring biennial because we didn't want anybody to lose their job. We found a system where all mediators could still work. We set a frame where the mediators could bring their own visions as to how to fill this frame with their approaches. This was done in an experimental way because we had a situation in which nobody knew how to do things.

LR: So would you say that COVID gave you an opportunity as a biennial to experiment and reconsider?

DÖ: I think so. I hope that we'll continue to reflect on it and take some things further. I would say that we tried to see it as an opportunity from the perspective of working with different publics.

LR: Did your management react quickly initially? In terms of the initial crisis management and planning, did you feel like you were in good hands?

DÖ: Personally, yes, structurally, I don't know. I really liked what you said about the virus being a 'co-creator'. It was a new situation for everybody. Not everybody's that fast in adapting or thinking of a new project.

I'm really curious to dig more into how you thought of a totally different exhibition format to deal with the situation. In Germany, we're still in this mood that everything's so sad and everything should be as it's always been: the exhibition, the openings, the artist talks etc. Yes, it is sad, but I feel, let's accept it now. The situation is what it is. We have to think about different ways of doing things and we just have to adapt, but I think the general mood was more, 'How can we find loopholes to still do the things we're used to?'

LR: Absolutely. It's hard to step away from plans. There was a moment in time when a lot of exhibitions went online and naturally, we're all starved of culture, but at the same time, the digital space is so oversaturated and it doesn't give you the same experience. And thus, as a curator or cultural manager, you still want to hold onto those dreams. And our exhibition was planned around the idea of re-enchantment as a reaction to all these dystopian futures and the many endings that the world supposedly goes through. So in many ways, the situation manifested what the curatorial statement was about, giving us an opportunity to show through actions how to function in equilibrium with the world. There is an end of a world, but it doesn't mean it's the end of the world. I was really, really proud of my workplace and

happy about our executive director, because when the news hit, her words were: 'Everyone go home, go to the countryside, take three weeks out. Just make sure your loved ones have their fridges stocked and everyone is safe. Make sure that your immune system is strong and we'll deliberate. And just call me if you need a chat, if you need a virtual hug.' Obviously all of us are invested in those dreams, so when you have to bury them, it's really difficult. But I think that loving and supporting the people you work with really helps you get through it. If you're having to re-imagine everything, it's beautiful to do that in a supportive team, because then you see the positives, and you accept the reality a lot more easily. I think that's definitely a key factor.

When the biennial actually opened, we were very careful about safety and thinking about who to fly out and who absolutely had to be there. And it was very brutal to say to artists that they didn't need to be here to install their work. And I think it was difficult for them, too. A lot of artists didn't want to, or couldn't fly out, or they were too scared. Now, we're used to having meetings on Zoom and being productive online and being able to converse every day. But obviously for a hands-on project it's difficult, yet we managed the remote communication well, I think.

DÖ: One of our artists even sent a video showing us how to open up the package and install the work. It was such a different way of installing an exhibition. We had a similar situation to yours, in the beginning. We were really taken care of by our director Gabriele Horn. She wrote comforting emails, made phone calls with detailed updates on the situation and certain decisions. No one had to quit their job. But during the installation period and then the opening of the biennial, it was a tough time and the team made a great job. With Corona tests, hygiene concepts and all these exceptional circumstances, no one has the right know-how, not even a director.

LR: How? [laughs] Who has those skills?

DÖ: Nobody. Nobody really knows.

LR: Yes, exactly. It's luck, it's openness to change. And then also being firm that you've made the right decision. Some of my colleagues felt confused at the beginning, just because they were told to go home and take care of their loved ones. They worried – did they still have a job? Our executive director very explicitly repeated, 'Everyone is still on the team, don't worry. We'll think of something, nobody is going anywhere.' Naturally, a lot of positions just sort of dissipated. One of my colleagues does HR and hospitality. There was no HR and hospitality to be done really. So then she was refashioned to assist in the communications department. And that was also really great: that people could change the particular role they were in.

DÖ: How was the installation phase for you?

LR: It was in the summer. We started installation two months before opening in August. So in June, everything was already being set up. We'd had an office there and the build-up had started in the spring already, but the build-up was meant to be towards an exhibition setting. And we'd reduced the duration to three weeks. Obviously, you don't want to pump in a lot of money for structures that are only up for three weeks. We had architects from Estonia and the beauty of these architects is that their whole concept was not to build from new materials. They wanted to reuse what was already on site. And so, they just changed their concept around, but it was still in line with their ideals. And what was beautiful was that they used rubble as signposts. And for a film, you can do a lot of illusionary work. You don't need walls per se. So just accepting the fact that things aren't permanent, our whole world changed into these temporary moments. And I love that that came through.

It was, I think, late June or early July when we realised we could open it to the public, and then suddenly we had to scurry to catch up with the time we'd lost. We could have workshops, for example, and we could have mediators and, suddenly HR began to think, 'Okay, we need venue staff.' And we needed the curator on site, obviously. So we flew her out from Paris and she isolated for two weeks and didn't see anyone, and had several tests. We also knew that there were particular performance artists that we

needed. Because that's an art that can't be translated into another media or format. So several flew out and isolated and then prepared their work. For example, Bridget Polk, who's from the US was there the whole time. She isolated with her wife for two weeks, and then she was onsite every day, performing work. And so, our whole structure of decision-making was to go for the ideal situation until we heard otherwise, and then take it down a notch or refashion it. So naturally, there'll be new restrictions as to how many people are allowed to gather, but we're going to aim for the rules that we have right now and just be ready to react immediately.

By the time the opening came about, we were allowed to have a thousand people gather within our square footage. The biennial was taking place in an old port building, which was humungous. So that was also an accidental benefit in terms of COVID restrictions, because you could always keep a distance from other viewers. There were huge windows for trucks to drive through that are constantly open, which was another key aspect: they're constantly open to the elements. So we couldn't have any fine work on paper, but there was this natural ventilation. It also meant that our mediators froze, and developed colds, but in terms of safety against this particular disease, we were set! But that was an accident.

DÖ: And how was it with the public? Did you see a change in your public?

LR: We realised we had to work 'hyperlocal', which is the term that everyone is using. So we focused more on the local press than we would have done. I mean, we have good partnerships locally, but the international press is naturally a significant partner if you're talking about biennials, since they're global projects.

We certainly had a lot more seniors, even though it was a difficult terrain to walk over. This might have been down to the fact that one of the artworks pulled in a lot of local crochet women – sadly, only women, but crocheters of various ages. And a lot of them came with their friends.

DÖ: This is good, I think. What working practices or ideas would you keep, when the pandemic is over and there's no other virus in line? Or will it be back to business as usual?

LR: Well, working locally is important to our biennial, it's in our mission statement. And I think COVID helped us work on our own mission statement even more, which is great. And so obviously, we'll keep working on that and not forget it and not let it get overshadowed by the global outlook.

What did you find the most difficult aspect?

DÖ: When there was the first lockdown in Germany, there were new regulations every two weeks: ten people are allowed, no seven, no fifteen, wear masks, children can come, can't come ... We constantly had to change our concept. We decided to come up with a structure that would work with every possible status of the regulations. That was the hardest part, to think of a framework so loose that it could happen in any case. But I think we were quite successful in this, in terms of the public programme.

We had a lot of formats working inside and outside, where people would move in between the spaces by themselves and come out and meet the mediator again, for example. Everything only happened by working closely together across departments. I've never experienced it to this extent in exhibitions before. For the mediation work, we needed to know the design of the exhibition because otherwise we couldn't plan the mediation formats, and the communication department needed exact information about what and how to communicate, because it had to do with hygiene and security. There was a constant dialogue, which was very valuable and should be taken forward into the next editions. Most of the time the exhibition is ready and then people expect your mediation work to start with everything given.

How did you handle the ticket situation? Was it free or did people have to get a ticket?

LR: We decided to have tickets just to keep the flow in check. It was very, very affordable, a lot cheaper than other years.

DÖ: It was the same in our case. People would have to buy a time slot.

LR: So their visits were timed?

DÖ: Yes the entrance time, but you couldn't say 'You have to leave after two hours'.

LR: Did it work, the timed entry?

DÖ: It worked. The team did a great job in calculating the numbers depending on the venue. But I think there's still a lot to learn from this time. For example, to also take care of the guards in terms of the hygiene measures, because they play a crucial role in keeping these measures working. They have to count how many people come in and they have to tell the visitors to wear a mask or to wait outside because there are already five people inside. So the hospitality is on their shoulders. But it's always the same in every art institution, with or without Corona: we have to work in a more collaborative way with the guards.

LR: Absolutely. We didn't have to think about this, because we had kilometres and kilometres of territory. The visitors spread out like ants.

DÖ: It sounds like it was a perfect space for this kind of biennial.

LR: It was! And it was chosen and selected purely for its aesthetic values and then happened to really work for COVID because we had the three floors of this humungous space. And that was just one portion of the wider territory. We had these huge meadows that had been seed bombed and we had performances in them. But it was a very long experience. You needed at least two hours to see the exhibition, but it was actually a five-hour experience. And that's really quite difficult. Also, we simplified the whole experience, to avoid gathering. We'd planned to have two cafés, one with a full kitchen. In the end, we had one small vegan café that served poke bowls and sandwiches and wine and coffee, but it wasn't adequate in this vast space. The sad reality is, you plan for COVID, you don't expect big numbers, but in the end when people do come, they still expect that experience, even though they know the situation of the world.

DÖ: It was the same with us. For example, we could only have seven people at a time in the children's workshops. And then some parents were like, 'But why are there so few people? This is so exclusive,' And we said, 'It's the regulation. We can't do it.' And they said, 'But these children go to school with thirty children or they go into the playground with fifty children.' I said, 'Yes, but every place has different regulations, so we have to adapt to the ones for museum spaces.'

How did you deal with sound? You had a big space. That's so different. But did you have headphones or how did it work?

LR: In some of the spaces we had headphones, but mostly not. How do you keep everything sanitary and safe?

DÖ: We worked with individual headphones, which was interesting because it was so quiet in the exhibition. No chatting. This was an interesting feeling. On an exhibition visit, you talk to people, you see people, you have a wine or a coffee. But COVID reshapes everything.

LR: Another thing that was really quite fun is that a lot of our audience members were dogs, because we were pet friendly and so they were everywhere. And I think this is also a reason why locally, we gained some traction and attention – people wanted to come because finally, there was a place they could go with their dog, because generally you can't go into exhibitions with dogs.

DÖ: No, you can't.

LR: A lot of artists have dogs and a lot of curators have dogs.

LR: Obviously people do have allergies, but in our venue, there was so much air passing through. But we're a really dog-friendly office. At one point, we had five dogs in the office, so having a lot of team members with dogs, it was a given that the biennial had to be dog-friendly.

DÖ: And are you working now on the next one?

LR: We actually currently have a lot of archival work to do. I think it's wonderful that our management considers the proper shaping of the archive a very significant portion of our jobs, instead of rushing to the next show. And a lot of our work now is also on the movie, which will come out at the beginning of 2021. An exhibition takes place in a certain time and space, but a movie is something that will go on and will hopefully go to film festivals next year. That would be great. That's sort of our next step. But yes, we are



thinking about when we can plan for the next biennial.

DÖ: We have to adapt to a situation like this somehow, and try to find creative solutions. I'm not saying everything has to be online, but we have to plan differently. The architecture of an exhibition has to be wider now – we have to be able to open windows. I think we have to focus on these things and be prepared in case something like this pandemic situation happens again.

LR: Absolutely. We've learned a lot in thinking about the choreography of the audience, and we didn't have that experience before. And because the number of cases in Latvia was so low, and the borders were closed for so long, we really lived in this bubble, where we thought we were safe. So if you look at the RIBOCA images, where crowds of people are following the curator for a tour, nobody's wearing a mask. You wouldn't believe, looking at those images that that was 2020. But it felt like there was no COVID, because we didn't have to restrict the number of people in the space; crowds of people would come and they would hang out in groups and watch the sunset. We were lucky in the timing, because just a few weeks later a case occurred in a museum just down the road and it closed for several weeks and it got really bad reports in the media, even though it wasn't the museum's fault.

But because this exhibition was created in unison with COVID, the show was different from how it was imagined. And there're a lot of ghosts in this exhibition. Even our exhibition guide had the artist's original idea, and then it was crossed out, and then the transformed concept was presented.

DÖ: Wow, that's nice.

LR: One could see what the idea had been, and what it is now.

DÖ: I like the idea of showing how the projects changed. This was something that I felt was sad in our case, because the original ideas weren't shown. This is an interesting point. Why can't we show the process? For example, in our case, the 11th Biennial was always communicated as a processual project because we opened before the big exhibition with a project space. But what do you consider as a process in the context of a global art biennial? I think a process needs to be visible – for example, when you show that projects changed, or the difficulties you experienced. In many cases in the art world in general, we polish a lot of things to make them shinier, but I think, especially in these pandemic times, we have to learn from difficulties. I'm so interested in showing how it worked in a certain space in comparison to another one. What does this mean? Right now, we have to talk not only about how successful the exhibitions are, but also about the practicalities in visiting exhibitions and making exhibitions and learning from different contexts.

LR: Absolutely. And then thinking about the local aspects. I mean, in the installation, all the teams were local. We just did everything we could do onsite and amongst ourselves. And for the movie we needed a professional film crew and a director. And so the film director who was selected was a highly acclaimed local director. So that's an interesting example of the sort of collaborations that come about. And, just like you were saying, there's this beautiful aspect of going into parks and into open spaces and having these impromptu workshops. I think that's so magical. We got the magic of learning completely new realms. So not just experimenting, but learning. We were involved in a seemingly constant crisis management in our daily planning and operation. You were saying that you didn't want to do all the extra work of having four different scenarios, which makes perfect sense. You saved yourself from superfluous and at times useless planning aspects. We didn't do that. We were flexibly but also concretely planning for the main idea and then altering it if needed and reacting to the news. There'd be news coming in every week, and because of that, it did become like crisis management.

DÖ: We had to be flexible.

LR: Yes. Flexible, with team support.

I have one more question. How important was it for you and your team to think about how other international biennials were dealing with the pandemic and what was happening elsewhere? Or were you really focused on what you were doing?

DÖ: Not many decided to do the exhibition, so we couldn't really learn from others. We were looking at how people dealt with the job situation of the mediators, how to take care of the team and give them the possibility to work. This is something that we researched a lot in different contexts, because as we all know, the first ones that had to go were positions like mediators.

LR: We were constantly feeling the pulse and asking, what are others doing? Even though the situations were so different. But we said 'Venice is still happening. Well then, we can't even consider ours not taking place', but then 'Oh, they've postponed.' So in many ways we were taking the advice of the world, but in the end, obviously we made our own decisions.

I want to say thank you. I really enjoyed this discussion I feel like I have support from the wider network of biennials.

DÖ: Yes it was really lovely. Thank you so much.

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### Duygu Örs and Laima Ruduša

Duygu Örs studied cultural studies in Berlin, Frankfurt/Oder and Istanbul. She works on postcolonial urban studies, Kurdish studies, and critical museology. Since 2019, she has been in charge of the mediation and outreach work of the Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art and since 2018, she also works for the mediation of KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

She is currently focusing on the intersections that arise from her various fields of interest that shape her mediation practice. Always politically motivated, she is concerned with formats that are institutionally and culturally established, their accessibilities and exclusions. She is interested in the atmospheric and sensory aspects of spaces, especially in the exhibition spaces.

Oriented to these and other questions, was the exhibition on Kurdish art as a form of resistance, *bêwelat – the unexpected storytellers* (nGbK, Berlin, 2021), on which she worked curatorially, and the artistic-research project on anti-discriminatory curatorial practices (CCC – curating through conflict with care) which she co-organised.

Laima Ruduša studied Art History in Boston, and completed her Master's degree in Münster, where she probed questions of nationalism and identity within Post-Soviet Latvia's art-exhibiting practices. She held creative, managerial and coordinator roles in contemporary arts organisations in Boston, London and Riga, and has experience teaching and translating (among her translated works: *Gallery 427* year book in 2020, the *FotoKvartals* Latvian Photography 2016 to 2019, and others). Before joining the Riga Biennial, Ruduša worked as the Executive Director of Kim Contemporary Art Centre which followed after taking a professional pause devoted to being the architect of childhood, and a domestic coordinator. Previously she worked as a Project Manager at Kim, where she managed the Nordic Baltic Art School program for the 55th Latvian National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, headed a partnership with an LU Anthropology Course that flourished into an Arts Education Symposium, and coordinated twenty exhibitions a year. Ruduša has experience in non-profit galleries, an artist's studio, university art spaces, even a commercial gallery. She is interested in stories and their creative expression, interconnections of objects and ideas, and gets a buzz from the 'a-ha' moments of life.

# 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.'

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### **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.



# Colophon

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