After a Year of Online Programming, What Worked?

Friese editors discuss the different trends in digital exhibition-making, from end-of-world scenarios to community-based initiatives

By Carina Buruchs, Sean Burns, Mimi Chu and Terence Trouillot in Opinion | 31 Mar 21

**Terence Trouillot** In February, an exhibition titled 'Goodbye, World', curated by Andreas Templin and Raimar Stange, was installed on an ice floe near the Arctic Circle in Swedish Lapland. Centred on environmental disaster, the show – featuring works by Jonathan Monk, Olaf Nicolai and Martha Rosler, among others – made me think of how COVID-19 has prompted a focus in the arts on the cataclysmic end of civilization. Accessible exclusively online, the exhibition is both tongue-in-cheek and allegorical, suggesting that all artworks will cease to exist in the future.

**Sean Burns** I’m opposed to the pessimism that generally accompanies such end-of-the-world narratives because it can close off the possibilities for improving the present.

**Mimi Chu** I think there’s often an unfair expectation that art should speak to the socio-political issues of the present moment. That said, this remote form of viewing art has become the new normal and I can think of other cases where the impossibility of the physical show has become part of the work, such as Simon Moretti’s current project, ‘Crocodile Cradle’, at PEER in London, a series of filmed performances only accessible via QR code, while a collage of literary contributions from artists are on display on the gallery’s glass façade.
SB In my mind, the work comes first. And, if the artwork requires the screen, then artists should use it. I think this moment has created space for some artists to be free from the pressures of the exhibition cycle.

Carina Bukuts I agree with you, Sean, but the pandemic also encouraged artists and curators to think outside of their comfort zones and explore different ways of presenting art.

SB Which is exciting.

MC Exactly. The work should come first, then evolve. Abbas Zahedi’s dormant exhibition, ‘Ouranophobia SW3’ [2020–21], located in a disused sorting office in Chelsea, west London, is a good example. When the show had to close due to lockdown, the artist founded the Sonic Support Group with some UK-based neurologists to explore the intersections between art, society and neuroscience. While the show was closed to the public, the exhibition space took on a new therapeutic role for people working on the frontlines. I saw the project on Instagram and there was something very intimate about following the artist’s point-of-view video documenting the work.

TT Absolutely! In trying to make sense of this moment, there seems to be all this pressure to create programming that instils a sense of optimism in terms of staying connected to community. In focusing on global disaster, ‘Goodbye, World’ has take the opposite track, picturing the end of the world as being everyone looking at their screens. Zahedi’s project makes me think of Barbana Castavacchia’s report for frieze on the incredible work that’s being done in Italy in response to the challenges of the pandemic. Turin’s Castello di Rivoli museum, for instance, will not only serve as a vaccination site but launched an online programme last December, ‘Digital PTSD’, about the traumatic impact of our new virtual reality.
lockdown
taking exercise
pontius pilates
washing hands
corona of thorns
second coming
second lockdown

John Smith, Lockdown, 2020 in Simon Moretti’s ‘Crocodile Cradle’, PEER, London. Courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry

MC I agree with Sean: this appetite for end-of-world scenarios leaves me flat. Art’s social purpose has really come to the fore during the pandemic and I’m much more excited by that.

CB For me, a good example of successful programming – which spoke to both the need to stay connected and to address the current crisis – was the community radio station launched by Bergamo’s Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. Not only did Radio GAmEC invite artists and curators from around the world to participate, it also offered helpful information for people who needed support and assistance.

MC That makes me think of Queer Correspondence – a lockdown mail-art initiative by Cell Project Space in London – which was really a back-to-basics approach to art engagement. At the heart of this, of course, is community, or a direct mode of exchange between the artist and, in this case, the recipient.

TT I do feel we should be wary of the virtue-signalling that sometimes accompanies these community-focused exhibitions. For instance, the Racial Imaginary Institute’s online takeover of David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles was amazing, but Ian Bourland’s review of the show was enlightening in encouraging us always to ask ourselves whether galleries and institutions are doing enough by simply collaborating with important organizations in the fight against racial justice.

SB This speaks to a long-standing grievance: how estranged from people’s lived realities convoluted artistic methods and ideas can sometimes seem. For festivals and conferences, in particular, the challenge during the pandemic has been simulating the communal exchange of ideas between virtual attendees. The best example of a digital space for free exchange that I’ve seen was at the Chaos Communication Congress, which is usually held in Leipzig. Instead, the organizers built a digital room in which avatars could interact as a group or as individuals.
MC That's true, Sean, but I've also been blown away by some of the convoluted artistic methods I've encountered during lockdown! Having the time to properly sit with stuff has been really meaningful: the opposite of the biennale effect (i.e. seeing too much art in too short a space of time).

CB For his exhibition 'Mine' at K21 in Düsseldorf last year, Simon Denny collaborated with artist Jan Berger to build an online version of the entire show using the video game Minecraft, and it looked completely mind-blowing! Another important point to raise in terms of the digital translation of artworks, I feel, is increased accessibility and inclusion.

TT Yes, COVID-19 has instigated important conversations around ableism – albeit incidentally.

MC We're all now engaging with these forms of remote access for which disabled communities have long been advocating. Artworks are being presented with audio and text descriptions for the visually impaired; films and talks are being screened with captions and subtitles for D/deaf viewers. But I'm not seeing this everywhere: there's still much work to be done.

SB It feels important that there's a shift in thinking in terms of in-person and online exhibitions: they're not in competition; both can exist without having to be compared.

MC I think they should be mutually beneficial. I've just been looking at the Chobi Mela International Photography Festival in Dhaka. They've closed their physical show but just launched an online version, accessible through a virtual map. The site incorporates hyperlinks and video content that helps gauge the overlapping contexts through which the participating artists are approaching photography.
MC I think that's certainly been enhanced over the past year. Roisin Táppóni wrote a piece for frieze in December on how art communities in the Arab world are flourishing online and it almost feels like IRL programmes are trying to keep up with this. I keep thinking back to a video talk the Indian photographer Sohrab Hura gave in May last year as part of Cuckoo Conversations. He spoke about how photographers are thinking through regional distinctions across Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and India. His first curatorial project, ‘Growing like a Tree’, at Ishara Art Foundation in Dubai, responds to these transnational exchanges. But then we’ve seen cases of artists producing site-specific works for art festivals remotely – something that would have been unimaginable in the past – and it all comes together, as is the case with the Busan Biennale. Emeka Ogboh’s sound work, Lagos Soundscapes (2020), is particularly interesting. Featuring recorded street sounds from Lagos, the work was played in the old town of Busan and really spoke to that city’s industrial history, even though the artist was unable to visit there.

CB Yes, the same was true for last year’s Manifesta 13 in Marseille, where several artists who couldn’t fly in were asked to install their works remotely. It’s interesting to consider whether these mega exhibitions will continue if there’s no longer an international press, art-world professionals or physical audience in attendance.

MC I think mega art events are more susceptible to criticism now. There’s less noise and distraction: everything’s just laid bare. Personally, I have more time for works that allow for some empty space. Klara Liden’s ‘Turn Me On’ at Sadie Coles, which opened last September, couldn’t have come at a more appropriate time. I remember walking into this empty gallery, from an even emptier central London, and seeing these electrical utility boxes and just thinking: ‘Yeah!’

CB In 2007, the Chinese artist Cao Fei launched RMB City on the digital platform Second Life, where people could meet up as avatars and do activities together. When I recently spoke with her about the project, I mentioned to her that she was way ahead of the curve. Now, a number of artists and museums have turned to Second Life once more to continue their work and programmes in the digital sphere. Berlin-based artist Samanta Bohnatsch, for instance, created the performance BB (in isolation) (2020) in Second Life and later livestreamed it via Instagram and archived it on YouTube. Thinking about the term ‘IRL’, I’m reminded of the interview frieze ran last August with Legacy Russell, the author of Glitch Feminism Manifesto (2020), where they use AFK (away from keyboard) as an abbreviation rather than IRL (in real life), since the latter implies that the digital isn’t a version of reality.

TT There’s definitely something to be said for the emancipatory space of the digital, particularly in relation to this constant nostalgia for, and push to return to, how things were in the art world. But so much of life – identity-building, sociality – is now digital.

MC The emancipatory space of the digital is a thorny issue. There’s this digital enlightenment trend I’ve been noticing among artists. I’m thinking about the group show ‘SugarCumPro “white and viscous gold”, curated by Jinho Lim at out_sight in Seoul last year. The exhibition’s theme of blurring the distinctions between on- and offline realities felt a little too new-age for me.

TT There’s a radical way of seeing these burgeoning technologies as forces for emancipation, and perhaps of seeing catastrophe as liberating. I constantly think of Frantz Fanon’s contention in The Wretched of the Earth [1961] that, if we want to reach a decolonized state, we need to destroy the current one.

CB I think of Andre Lorde’s lecture The Master’s Tool Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House [1984].
CARINA BUKUTS
Carina Bukuts is assistant editor of Frieze and is based in Berlin, Germany. She is editor-in-chief of PASSÉ-AVANT and a member of AICA Germany.

SEAN BURNS
Sean Burns is an artist, writer and Frieze editorial assistant based in London, UK.

MIMI CHU
Mimi Chu is assistant editor of Frieze and is based in London, UK.

TERENCE TROUILLOT
Terence Trouillot is associate editor of Frieze. He lives in New York, USA.

TAGS
Carina Bukuts, Sean Burns, Mimi Chu, Terence Trouillot, Discussion

SHARE THIS

291 church st. nyc, ny 10013
p: 212.431.5270
info@apexart.org; www.apexart.org