

PANDEMIC AS SITE

by Lia Mazzari, April 2020

I. WE LIVE IN WILD TIMES, NOW MORE THAN EVER

'These are strange times and I know everyone has some connection right now to loss and/or distance between loved ones, so I'm sending my solidarity. My eyes are square and my ears burn as everything turns into an online jpeg or podcast, with so much presence I hope you have the time to read this invitation letter (...) I've become concerned with the overwhelming drive and demand to move everything online. It seems to overlook other spaces of creative production which are rich for experimentation and public engagement, especially when thinking of time-based and performative art practices.

In recent weeks I've put together a project Decameron-19: dispatches from the isolated city as a response to the lockdown that aims to create new works in the public realm rather than focusing on isolation in the home. It is a long-distance self-directed collaboration between a network of international artists that I started with artist and lockdown companion Ben Parry. We are approaching this with artists in mind who we think can best respond to the challenge of working beyond the studio in these extraordinary circumstances. Our primary concern has been to put together a diversity of different mediums and practices ranging from performance, dance, sound, film, activism and architectural/urban practices, so that the collaborative process is enriching for everyone involved. I hope the logic makes sense when you read the letter of invitation.'

This is an extract from an email I sent out to 10 artist teams that I have invited to partake in the project Decameron-19: dispatched

from the isolated city. While I wait for replies - of acceptance or rejection - time opens up the covid-void again. What void? Feelings of insecurity, fear that I have asked too much of these artists and friends, that I've disturbed them during this difficult time, that the project is not interesting or radical enough or that they can't trust me with their vorace creativity; a feeling that the artists I've assembled are on some level too different in practice, incoherent together and some in the mix maybe a little too wild? Insecurities intensify when there is no sign on the other end, no voice, not even a rejection; feelings I've come to accept in recent weeks. While I'm waiting for them to accept or reject the invitation to this project, I should stick to my choices.

We live in wild times, now more than ever, reminds Ella Finer during an online correspondence with 11 other sound artists and researchers during lockdown. She calls this the Acoustic Commons Study Group and prompts me to read Halberstam and Nyong'o's Introduction: Theory in the Wild:

'The rewilding of theory proceeds from an understanding that first encounters with wildness are intimate and bewilder all sovereign expectations of autonomous selfhood. To be wild in this sense is to be beside oneself, to be internally incoherent, to be driven by forces seen and unseen, to hear in voices, and to speak in tongues. By abandoning the security of coherence, we enter a dark ecology, where, to quote Michel Foucault (1994: 302) from The Order of Things, "nature can no longer be good." But even as wildness is internal in a psychic sense, we also sense it as an extrahuman, supra-

human force, what Timothy Morton (2013) dubs a “hyperobject” and what might be received as a message from nature to humans reminding us that there could be and probably will be life without “us.” As Nina Simone reminds us, “wild is the wind,” and the wildness of the weather, internally and externally, implies a pathetic fallacy that tethers the undoing of the human to the rage of new storms blowing in across the Caribbean. Wildness is where the environment speaks back, where communication bows to intensity, where worlds collide, cultures clash, and things fall apart.’ ||| 1 |||

II. NO RETURN TO NORMAL, NO TO BUSINESS AS USUAL

Many of us felt that a rewilding of the status quo was waiting to happen. Being in the centre of such times of upheaval, the pandemic becomes an amplifier of pre-existing inequalities, all playing back simultaneously now louder than before. The virus keeps moving, maybe even morphing and proliferating its way around the globe and I can’t help but ask myself over and over again: What is the role of art during these uncommon times?

Pre-Covid thoughts and observations get the gut moving as questions I try to deal with in my practice resurface. They seem now more relevant than ever: In a world where individualism is more cherished than the collective, where digital space increasingly wins over physical space, where our high castles of bodily expression risk to become obsolete due to the privatisation of our cities, I wonder what the future will bring?

In(side)-covid limbo, debates are arising concerning the survival of the cultural sector, especially the small independent art and music scene responsible for a vast part of our cultural and artistic production, an economy often pushed into the shadows of what Gregory Sholette refers to as the dark matter of the art world. ||| 2 ||| These establishments, subcultural meeting points, centres of critical debate and physical expression were the first businesses

forced to board up their windows and they will be the last ones to re-open their doors.

Post-covid shock, the forced-upon cessation of everyday life and a self-asserted pause to rethink what the role of the artist in all of this is. I still want to see this moment as an opportunity. Arundhati Roy reports from India, one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic and the brutalisation of the urban poor under Modi’s Hindu nationalist regime; she manages to inflict hope into the reader by seeing this pandemic as a portal and gateway between one world and the next to come.

‘...We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.’ ||| 3 |||

We all know we can’t go back to normal. Nobody wants to go back to normal, and maybe this is where a gap opens up, a new site; and the pandemic allows for critical debate and the imagining of alternative futures.

III. THE CITY AS PLAYGROUND

As an artist working predominantly with sound and site, I can’t help myself but listen carefully to the extraordinary shift in the soundscape since London went into lockdown. On my regular cycling trips around the locked down city I take a field recorder on the hunt for new tones, frequencies, moments and noise patterns. It sounds like the earth went on a pause, a forced upon break from itself. I keep cycling further, looping back and through unfamiliar places. I let the abandoned monstrosity of the Nine Elms development site sink in, and drown a hydrophone in the Thames in an attempt to record the strangeness of the river. Does it sound any different from before Covid-19? Does the pandemic reflect in the acoustic ecology of the now quiet waters of the Thames? While more bird song re-appears, the sound of screaming

children playing in the schoolyards has gone missing. Clear skies and sparkling cityscapes that now seem Photoshop'd are emphasized by the absence of constant air traffic. Crowds of people are engaged in their weekly ritual of cheering, clapping and banging on pots in support for key workers, and to neighbours who reaffirm their existence in wanting to interrupt this strange non-silence. The global hum has calmed down and our ears are attuning and listening to the new din of our cities. ||| 4 |||

What might the opacities and vibrancies, the multiplicity of global entanglement and its soundings, suggest or enable in terms of contemporary struggle? Can one craft a means of empowerment by way of sonic thought, a listening from below, in order to nurture the power of the unseen or the not-yet-apparent? ||| 5 |||

Human behaviour has changed dramatically, and despite the tragic consequences of the pandemic, a site seems to emerge for some of the voices to be heard that were isolated and muted by louder ones. Our hearing bodies are making sense of our new sonic environment, as we learn to understand better a new acoustic agency.

The city, a now eerie space, presents itself as a creative opportunity that not many have taken into consideration, not yet at least. I make this claim because since London went into lockdown I spend my early mornings alternating between hours of corona news, followed the next morning by consuming the art worlds' responses and drive to continue to produce content. In fact, while our cultural institutions intuitively moved everything online within the course of days, they keep casting more competition into the situation by creating ever more 'open calls'. The artistic community rushes understandably into application mode, haunted by existential fears, like the rest of the world, everyone tries to make sense of the moment and make poignant art in self-isolation.

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I look for more criticality within my own creative community. As an artist and casual art worker, I wonder why such a large part of my generation just obeys to whatever the screen tells them is good or bad, relevant or outdated and so on; conforming without taking one moment to slow down. In times of Covid-19 job insecurity has taken on new urgency. Before the lockdown I was attempting to unionise my colleagues at work, on zero-hours contracts, in an effort to protect our rights, what at the time felt like a pointless task, because again, we were all caught up chasing unachievable jobs, residencies, competitions and open calls that the art world keeps baking like bread rolls.

In this swarm of open calls one could wonder, what happened to the role of the curator?

Slow down, Sloth down!

A black and white sloth hangs from a tree in the tropical forest in Costa Rica. It doesn't move, or does it? I think it's smiling too. I let my ears drown in the sound of the rainforest, my eyes keep following the slow sloth, just hanging there. Just hang in there.

At some point the sloth starts shimmering in prismatic colours, a chromatic aberration that causes my eyes to relax even more and tune into the slowness of the sloth. Fringes of colours surround the sloth, the Righteous Brothers' 'Unchained melody' starts blasting out of my

laptop speakers and Bobby Hatfield sings 'Time goes by so slowly... And time can do so much...' This is Ben Rivers' ode to slowness 'Now, at Last!', a highlight of the lockdown morning watch.

||| 6 |||

Temporarily obsolete, the empty city could be a playground for artists of any kind. In a time where our cultural institutions and galleries are forced to stay closed, busy inventing new ways of virtual audience engagement, I find myself still walking and cycling empty streets, week after week. The pandemic makes London appear in a strange light. After weeks under lockdown I'm starting to think, if construction and building works can start again why should artists keep making in isolation? Why is the creative labour hosted almost entirely online and behind closed doors when we could also make creative use of this unique moment and re-enter the critical space of our cities? As so many cultural critics and public alike have asserted the importance of art in keeping us sane and entertained, to what extent can the artist be thought of as an essential worker?

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IV. DECAMERON-19 OR THE CITY AS BODY

Weeks after North Italy goes into lockdown, the Pontifex defies it to re-perform an old ritual with the aspiration to send hope to his believers. A crucifix hailed as 'miraculous' after it survived fires in 1519 and which believers say helped to end an outbreak of the plague in 1522, lives now in the church in San Marcello al Corso in Rome. In a dramatic move the Pontifex decides to walk on his own (surrounded by numerous security guards) through the streets of Rome to reach the church that houses the crucifix to pray for the end of the virus.

The Christian world watches. Everybody loves it. Even I do. I find myself struck by the effect the ritual has. The intensified experience keeps reverberating in my head.

A city without citizens is uncanny. I think back on those first moments when the news and social media channels were flooded with images of deserted cities, our urban landmarks emptied of humans that we recognise only from post-apocalypse and zombie movies. I'm not even sure if there is a specific term for this effect that relates to the city emptying itself out, imploding into itself; something like an exodus but without the citizens leaving the city; an ever flowing stream that stopped; there is no movement left in this place; the spatial confines of the city during this unstable event have become stable... only for some time.

Our cities become plague space. I'm imagining the ill city as body. A sick corpus with its organs attacked by the virus, unable to recover, breathing heavily. It gives the impression it is dormant, like the virus while it proliferates throughout the entire system passing through blood streams and public transport.

Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron depicts a variety of bawdy and bloody tales of love, intrigue, sickness, politics, poverty, religion and so on, but most essentially the work gives an account of how life was at the time, using the plague of 1348 as an event to construct a world of 100 stories around it. The Decameron, also called Prince Galeotto, was among the first printed books, leading the way with a folio edition printed in Venice in 1471. An edition with a series of wood carvings illustrating some of the scenes was published in 1492. ||| 7 |||

Upon the arrival of the virus in Milan, I reminded myself of the obligatory school read of the Italian classic. Forced into lockdown, my interest in using the 'pandemic as site' kept growing.

In order to experiment with the contagious and isolated city as a site, situation and context to make art - as opposed to the safe household or

home - I invited 10 artist teams from different practices to participate in a move to co-create 100 dispatches from their respective cities. Drawing similarities from the Decameron, I'm hoping to lay a foundation for a project that enables artists to create, collaborate and communicate beyond closed borders; together apart. Using the pandemic as site, we will invert tales of isolation and release them into the city as a method to curate an interdisciplinary dialogue that collects stories of different time zones, geographies, practises and media, performed in many different stages/conditions of lockdown.

The void is closing. 9 out of 10 artist teams have accepted the invitation to partake in Decameron-19. In the coming weeks we will collaborate on the creation of performative actions and public interventions and document them as 100 dispatches from the isolated city. Participating artists are:

1. Peter McCaughey, (site-responsive public art / social practice) Glasgow, Scotland, UK.
2. Sharmilla Sarmant, (sculpture, socially engaged practice, activism) Mumbai, India.
3. Crystable Riley (make-up artist, drummer) & Seymour Wright (musician, sound art) London, UK.
4. Yeah You, Freya & Gwilly Edmondez (performance, music) Sheffield, UK
5. Sholto Dobie (sculpture, sound, curation) & Dovilé Simonyte (painting, illustration) Vilnius, Lithuania.
6. Anja Dimitrijevic & Laura Santini (performance, video) Belgrade, Serbia and Bergamo, Italy.
7. Mathieu Tremblin & Cynthia Montier (urban intervention, public art) Strasbourg, France.
8. Igor Ponosov (urban intervention, public art) Moscow, Russia.

9. Ben Parry (social practice, sculpture) & Lia Mazzari (performance, sound art) Bath and London, UK

||| 1 ||| Halberstam, Jack and Nyog'o' Tavia, Introduction: Theory in the Wild in South Atlantic Quarterly, Duke University Press 2018, Accessed 11th May 2020.

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||| 3 ||| Roy, Arundhati, The pandemic as a portal in Financial Times 3rd April 2020, Accessed 11th May 2020.

||| 4 ||| For more writing on the city din in Shannon Mattern's Urban Auscultations; or , Perceiving the Action of the Heart in Places Journal April 2020, Accessed 11th May 2020.

||| 5 ||| LaBelle, Brandon, Sonic Agency Goldsmiths Press, London, 2018.

||| 6 ||| Rivers, Ben, Now, at Last! 40min film, UK, 2018, accessed on 17th April 2020

||| 7 ||| Boccaccio, Giovanni, The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio, Neill & Co. LTD. for Navarre Society Limited, Edinburgh, London, no date.

[Image] Pollard, A.W. Frontispiece to the first illustrated edition, Decameron, Venice, 1492. no date.