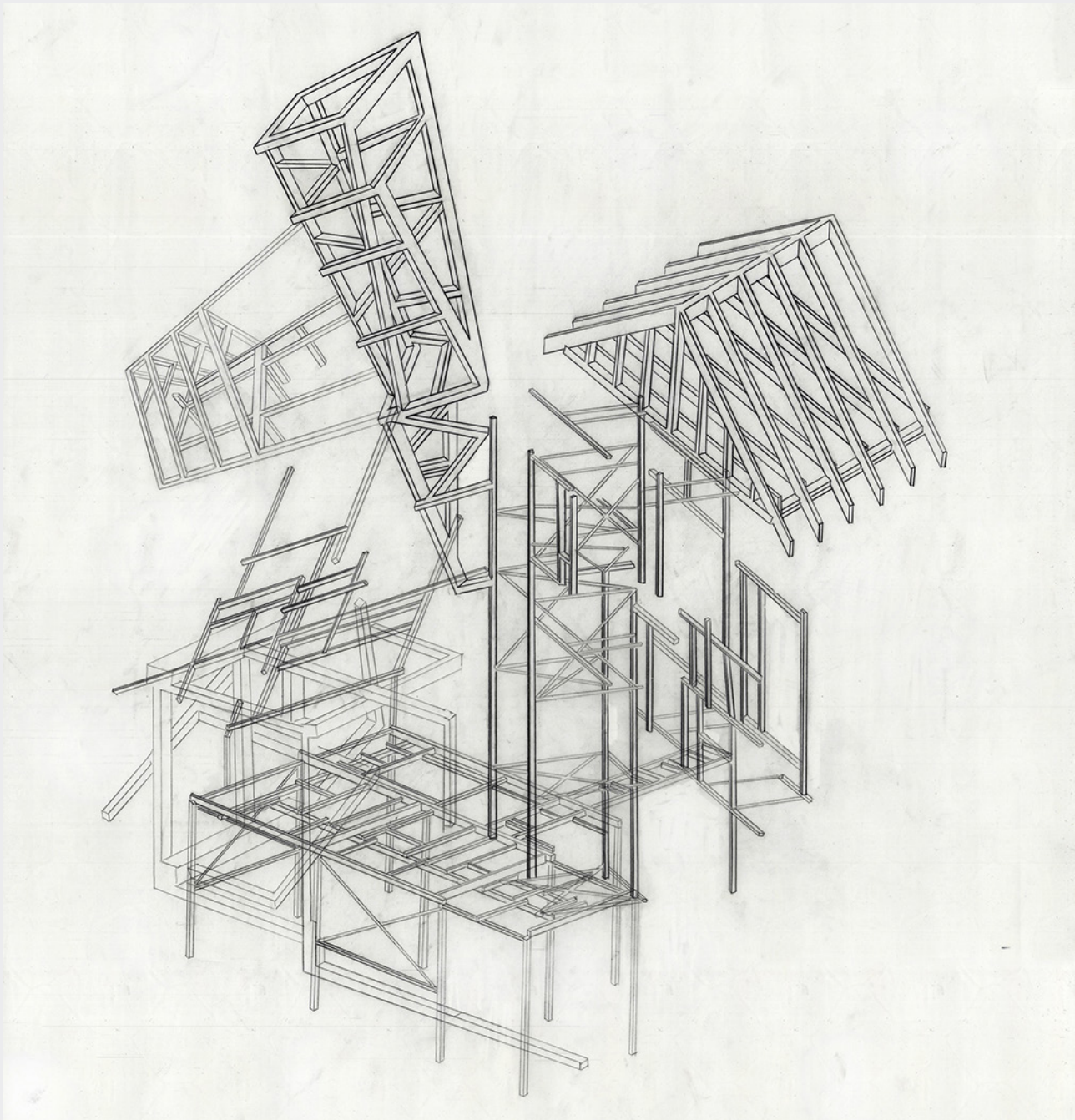


# TILTING (1)

Issue 07

The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge

April 2020



Sara Graham, *Conjecture Diagram no. 05*, 2014. Graphite on mylar. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

## **tilt** (v.1)

Old English *tyltan* "**to be unsteady**," from *tealt* "unsteady," from Proto-Germanic *taltaz* (source also of Old Norse *tyllast* "to trip," Swedish *tulta* "to waddle," Norwegian *tylta* "**to walk on tip-toe**," Middle Dutch *touteren* "**to swing**"). Meaning "**to cause to lean, tip, slope**" (1590s) is from sense of "push or fall over." Intransitive sense "to lean, tip" first recorded 1620s.

## **tilt** (v.2)

"**to joust**," 1590s, from tilt (n.1). Related: *Tilted*; *tilting*. The figurative sense of *tilting at windmills* is suggested in English by 1798; the idiom is from Don Quixote, who mistook windmills for giants.



*The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* is a serial broadsheet publication produced by the Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto Mississauga. Initiated in conjunction with *The Work of Wind: Air, Land, Sea* in 2018–19 to expand perspectives on environmental violence through artistic practices, cultural inquiry, and political mobilization, the SDUK is becoming a signature triannual Blackwood publishing initiative in 2020.

As an organization addressing the challenges of the 21st century through artistic-led research, the Blackwood’s ambition is to convene, enable, and amplify the transdisciplinary thinking necessary for understanding our current multi-scalar historical moment and co-creating the literacies, skills, and sensibilities required to adapt to the various socio-technical transformations of our contemporary society. Such a commitment requires a lithe methodology that is rooted in the arts, inspired and informed by emergent methods of curatorial research, and shaped by transdisciplinary engagements with collaborators from a host of other disciplines and partners working outside the university, whether in industry, business, government, or civil society. This methodology is necessary for contemporary research-based practices because the so-called “wicked problems” that challenge the stability of contemporary societies can no longer be addressed from a single disciplinary perspective.

## THE SOCIETY FOR THE DIFFUSION OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE (SDUK)

*The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (SDUK) composes and circulates an ecology of knowledge based on the relationship and antagonism of “useful” ideas. The name of this innovative platform is borrowed from a non-profit society founded in London in 1826, focused on publishing inexpensive texts such as the widely read *Penny Magazine* and *The Library of Useful Knowledge*, and aimed at spreading important world knowledge to anyone seeking to self-educate. Both continuing and troubling the origins of the society, the Blackwood’s SDUK platform asks: what constitutes useful knowledge? For whom? And who decides?

## TILTING

On March 23, the Blackwood put forward a call for submissions, in response to the irrefutably global provocation of COVID-19 currently reconfiguring nearly every aspect of life on Earth. The call recognized that these uncertain socio-political circumstances demand agile, dynamic, and multifaceted responses. In their recent book *Now*, the agents of The Invisible Committee call for us to generate desirable social and political worlds through an improvisatory *tilt*: strategic action that cuts transversally across vertical hierarchies and horizontal networks—privileging neither, in favour of an “intelligence of the situation.”<sup>1</sup> With decisive actions implemented by individuals, organizations, businesses, and governments, the Blackwood, as a public gallery within a university, asked: how to acknowledge this pandemic as a “matter of concern,” while responding to its broad-ranging effects across our networks of artists, writers, and cultural workers as a “matter of care”?<sup>2</sup> An urgent and provisional response comes in the form of *TILTING*, a special digital issue of the SDUK.

*TILTING (1)* brings together selected contributions from this call, in an attempt to support those who have been unmoored from their sources of financial resources. These contributions, alongside a few conceptual provocations from supporters of the Blackwood, are gathered in the pages that follow and on a new SDUK publishing microsite at [blackwoodgallery.ca](http://blackwoodgallery.ca).

*TILTING (2)* will be released May 1, 2020.

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MISSISSAUGA

Front and back cover images:  
**Sara Graham** has produced a diverse body of work that shares a concern with the images, issues, and ideas that surround and make up the cities we live in or those that we imagine. Graham maintains an ongoing interest in how people and communities shape and are shaped by the numerous systems and networks within the everyday lives of cities, and in how people move within and around cities. She has developed a body of work in which she has explored different ways to transform a viewer’s perception of “place” using forms of architecture, storytelling, and mapping.

- 1 The Invisible Committee, *Now* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2017), 158.
- 2 María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

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Please note: the Blackwood Gallery and offices are closed throughout spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, staff are reachable by email only.

# tl;dr part 1

## Editorial

*Listen to the general, every goddamn word,  
how many ways can you polish up a turd?*  
—Tom Waits, “Hell Broke Luce”<sup>1</sup>

After reading countless articles and essays detailing the impacts of COVID-19, we wanted to add an additional description of this pandemic as an affective planetary attention disorder that quickly evolved from a generic WTF to an alarming OMFG. Then, because GTFO is no longer advisable, or permissible, or even possible for many, we swiftly built an online platform to host the SDUK; if you are reading this as printed matter, please visit [blackwoodgallery.ca](http://blackwoodgallery.ca) and open many new tabs to read at your leisure.<sup>2</sup> As we continued to assemble this publication and work through the editorial text, the myriad ways in which the pandemic has helped to explicate a seemingly infinite list of social, economic, and environmental failures, across innumerable scales, became increasingly apparent and extremely disconcerting. Thus, in the first part of our editorial, we consider a preliminary group of concepts, strategies, and other persistent refrains that have tilted our efforts and operations as a public university art gallery; in the second part of the editorial, we’ll be back to work on some additional concepts and practices that we believe will continue to shape the next phase of this asymmetrical planetary crisis.

Stuck at home, our team has been fortunate enough to be working and reading. We returned to Félix Guattari, who reminds us: “A child that sings in the night because of his fear of the dark tries to reestablish control of events that are too quickly deterritorializing for his liking and that begin to proliferate in the cosmos and in the imaginary. Each individual, each group, each nation thus equips themselves with a range of basic refrains for conjuring.”<sup>3</sup> For Guattari, the refrain is a modality of semiotization that allows an individual (a group, a people, a nation, a culture) to receive and project the world according to reproducible and communicable formats. It is a process of conjuring that also corresponds to the act of thinking because all thought unfolds in relation to its constitutive refrains. Thought, in this sense, is not merely ideational and cannot be designated as an entirely theoretical enterprise; thinking is at stake in every sensuous, aesthetic, and artistic practice and production. And, in this sense, we are certain of one thing: *this is not the time to stop thinking*.

Among the emergent lexicon of new epidemiological terms made ubiquitous by our compulsion to repeat them (aren’t these also refrains with which we attempt to manage our fear?), we think it is especially important to pause and pay attention to *communicability*.<sup>4</sup> According to its etymological origin by way of the Late Latin term *communicabilis*, the verb *communicare* means “to share.” The communicable is that which can be or has been shared, communicated, or transmitted; straddling an imaginary that is simultaneously informational and biological (in the sense of contagion and infection), the adjective tends to precede the noun “disease” in descriptions of COVID-19 as a “communicable disease.” Yet it strikes us that many other heterogeneous communications have also been shared; indeed, the becoming-communicable of planetary hyperconnectedness and hypersynchronization, of indefensible social and environ-

mental injustices, and of the absurd yet brutal reality of basing access to healthcare on one’s job or prior capital accumulation resound in concert. If the maniacal sounds of racialized capitalism have buzzed noisily in the ears of the dispossessed since Western civilization began committing its foundational genocides in Africa and the Americas, it seems that the maddening planetary soundtrack of viral communicability is making the racket of inequality intolerable even for those who, until only weeks ago, had imagined themselves well insulated from the subaltern clamour.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, we are aware that the most devastating impacts of the crisis will affect the most vulnerable communities and individuals. We also insist that none of these connections are particularly new for all those struggling against the violence of cap-



italism. However, the irrefutable intrusion of the pandemic has forced even the mainstream media to call into question geopolitical borders, species distinctions, and social classes (and much else besides)—in certain moments it appears these categories could collapse altogether, while in other instances, they are over-coded with even greater brutality to reinsure the inequalities they help maintain.<sup>6</sup> In the incontestable words of Saidiya Hartman, “The plot of her undoing begins with his dominion. It begins in the fifteenth century with a papal bull, with a philosopher at his desk, pen in hand, as he sorts the world into categories of genus and species.”<sup>7</sup> “The undoing of the plot,” Hartman continues later in the essay, “does not start on bended knee, it does not begin with ballots or bullets, or with an address to the court, or with a petition, or with the demand for redress, or with the slogan: no justice, no peace. It begins with the earth under her feet. It begins with all of them gathered at the river and ready to strike, with all of them assembled in the squatter city, with all of them getting ready to be free in the clearing. They don’t say what they know: all things will be changed.”<sup>8</sup>

The planetary pre-existing condition of oppression and injustice under globalized capitalism has been laid bare by the contingent spread of a zoonotic virus that has now infected human beings living in nearly every country on Earth. What figure can bear such a transition, when “all things will be changed”? Again, we turn to Hartman, who, in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, enlivens the following figuration: “The chorus bears all of it for us. The Greek etymology of the word *chorus* refers to *dance within an enclosure*. What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure?” She then explains: “The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise.”<sup>9</sup> To embolden and realize these dreams, we also need to consider how we can reimagine the relation between the chorus and the infrastructure that it appropriates, repurposes, and inevitably alters toward other means and ends.

Because infrastructure, as Susan Leigh Star defined it, is the kind of stuff that only appears when it breaks, the virus and its attendant medical, logistical, and unemployment crises have allowed a *lot* of infrastructure to appear in full view.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that these breaks were not simply results of the pandemic; that is, it was not necessary that these extensive systems would lie broken for the world to see.<sup>11</sup> Instead, as Michelle Murphy notes in an essay on earlier cholera and Ebola outbreaks, “emergency remediation [...] is an achievement of the politics of infrastructure; it is the result of the purposeful building of some infrastructures and not others, of funding emergency medicine to save from death and not durable systems to protect health.”<sup>12</sup> With remarkable prescience, she adds, “In our contemporary historical conjuncture, history seems to repeat, where infrastructures to secure the global logistic chains that maintain resource extraction are protected while the task of affirming human health remains the concern of temporary infrastructures of emergency humanitarianism.”<sup>13</sup> With the real costs of such arrangements now laid bare across the globe, it is imperative to consider struggles regarding infrastructure investment and maintenance from an intersectional perspective that also attends to the long shadows cast by imperialism and colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

In his recent essay “The Universal Right to Breathe,” Achille Mbembe reflects on the asymmetries of the crisis and the various material dependencies that it unveils and perpetuates. “In Africa especially, but in many places in the Global South,” Mbembe explains, “energy-intensive extraction, agricultural expansion, predatory sales of land and destruction of forests will continue unabated. The powering and cooling of computer chips and supercomputers depends on it. The purveying and

supplying of the resources and energy necessary for the global computing infrastructure will require further restrictions on human mobility. Keeping the world at a distance will become the norm so as to keep risks of all kinds on the outside. But because it does not address our ecological precariousness, this catabolic vision of the world, inspired by theories of immunization and contagion, does little to break out of the planetary impasse in which we find ourselves.”<sup>15</sup> Breaking out of this impasse demands that we first irreparably break our image of the market as a viable system for social organization and reproduction. As Andrea Muehlebach contends: “Rather than pay tribute to the market, society should pay tribute to that which holds it together, socially and materially—its infrastructure—and translate that tribute into maintenance and care.”<sup>16</sup> Not only do we agree, we also believe that maintenance and care require getting organized.

Few moments in recent history provide such a clear distinction between the work of criticism and the practice of coordination. In a recent episode of *Democracy Now!*, Juan González asserted: “I firmly believe it is not enough for radicals and progressives to rail against the situation [...] we also have to promote grassroots efforts. [...] I urge others, across the country, in your own neighbourhoods, to do what you can—don’t depend on the private sector or some promised government assistance programs, which may or may not materialize—we’ve got to pull together as much as we can, with our own neighbours, the ninety-nine per cent, and support each other and keep fighting to preserve and defend people in our local communities.”<sup>17</sup> For all its virtues, criticism can’t feed, shelter, or heal our neighbours in this crisis; the intelligence of critique must also attend to the moment as it is and instaurate the requisite practices demanded by the situation.<sup>18</sup> It is in this sense that The Invisible Committee contend: “we propose paying careful attention to situations and to the forces that inhabit and traverse beings, in conjunction with an art of *decisive* assemblages.”<sup>19</sup> When they go on to claim that our only recourse to “transversally uniting all the elements deserting this society” depends on our fidelity to the “intelligence of the situation,” we vehemently agree. They continue, with an attention to tilting: “It is everything that makes the situation gradually understandable, everything that tracks the movements of the adversary, everything that identifies the usable paths and the obstacles. Based on that intelligence, an occasional vertical expedient needed to *tilt* certain situations in the desired direction can well be improvised.”<sup>20</sup> As we attempt to tilt, lean, and tip our situation—namely, as a public art gallery whose facilities are closed for the foreseeable future to the public—into unknown and untested directions, improvisation is fast becoming our organizational watchword.

Within the public arts sector in Canada, countless long-form impact surveys on emergency aid measures are being conducted by private research companies in the hope of finding cures and remedies in data. That is all well and good, but we know the impact of the crisis cannot be measured by technocrats in search of efficiencies and numbers alone will not propel transformation. In *The Economization of Life*, Michelle Murphy discusses how practices of quantification have worked to “install economy as our collective environment, as our bottle, as our surround. How does capitalism know and dream its own conditions through numbers and data?” She also asks how we might assemble life differently toward other futures.<sup>21</sup> The pandemic has also directed much attention to questions of accountability; in this regard, our Blackwood Gallery team is not immune to self-reflection and reorientation regarding how we can remain accountable to our community. We recognize that for many, time is tight, resources are scarce, and struggles are intense. Here we evoke triage as one mode of doing.<sup>22</sup> With *TILTING* we have endeavoured to create an expedient means to support those who have been unmoored from their sources of financial resources, while simultaneously thinking about how to respond *at scale*. Our mandate remains the same: “We support and activate artists, curators, and writers who incite us to be responsive, cooperative, critical, and answerable.”<sup>23</sup>

Again, and still emphatically: *now is not the time to stop thinking*.

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault considers the persistence of thought and culture in his discussion of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*—whose eponymous protagonist introduced to the world the credulity of “*tilting at windmills*”—with the following remarks: “Generally speaking, what does it mean, no longer being able to think a certain thought? Or to introduce a new thought? Discontinuity—the fact that within the space of a few years a culture sometimes ceases to think as it had been thinking up till then and begins to think other things in a new way—probably begins with an erosion from the outside, but which it has never ceased to think from the very beginning. Ultimately, the problem that presents itself is that of the relations between thought and culture: how is it that thought has a place in the space of the world, that it has its origin there, and that it never ceases, in this place or that, to begin anew?”<sup>24</sup> In this bewildering moment of discontinuity, what thoughts are no longer thinkable? What thoughts are emerging, now just barely discernible in their fledgling first moments? How can we care for them? How can we foster their flourishing in anticipation of a world still to come? In their exemplary book *Women Who Make a Fuss*, Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret are unflinching: “Think we must.”<sup>25</sup>

As a public gallery in suspension for an indeterminate duration, Mbembe’s remarks on cessation also feel compelling and pertinent to the shared experience of our current condition. He writes, “At this juncture, this sudden arrest arrives, an interruption not of history but of something that still eludes our grasp. Since it was imposed upon us, this cessation derives not from our will. In many respects, it is simultaneously unforeseen and unpredictable. Yet what we need is a *voluntary cessation, a conscious and fully consensual interruption*. Without which there will be no tomorrow. Without which nothing will exist but an endless series of unforeseen events.”<sup>26</sup> Caught as we are between a 24/7 news cycle intent on capturing as much of our attention and imagination as possible and the horrifying slow violence of a crisis still unpredictably unfolding, we require new collective refrains to conjure many tomorrows that can provide respite from unnecessary morbidity and hunger, generalized anxiety, and a hybridized psychosocial and economic depression at the scale of the planet.<sup>27</sup>

- 1 Tom Waits, “Hell Broke Luce,” accessed at: <https://youtu.be/0Fju9o8BVJ8>.
- 2 tl;dr = too long, didn’t read; COVID-19 = Coronavirus Disease 2019; WTF = What The Fuck; OMFG = Oh My Fucking God; GTF0 = Get The Fuck Out; SDUK = Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.
- 3 Félix Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious: Essays in Schizoanalysis*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 107. See also Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
- 4 The remarks that follow depart from John Paul Ricco’s description of the incommunicable. “This would be to speak and think and write in terms of our common virality, contagion, and collective contamination—those ‘vectors’ that are the forms and modes of undetectable or anonymous commerce and communication. This would, at the same time, not lose sight of the incommunicable that always persists at the limits (but, again, perhaps also at the heart) of the known and the communicable. It is this that makes any community worth living, unbecoming. It is to this that Jean-Luc Nancy recently gave the name ‘commonvirus.’” See John Paul Ricco, “Risks and Pleasures of Bodily Abandonment and Freedom,” March 30, 2020, <https://unbecomingcommunity.wordpress.com/>.
- 5 On the foundational genocides of the West, see Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 6 This is especially the case for communities living under settler colonial occupation. See Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 7 Saidiya Hartman, “The Plot of Her Undoing,” (Feminist Art Coalition: Notes on Feminism), 1, <https://feministartcoalition.org/essays-list/saidiya-hartman>.
- 8 Hartman, “The Plot of Her Undoing,” 5–6.
- 9 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), 347–348.
- 10 See Susan Leigh Star, “The ethnography of infrastructure,” in *American Behavioural Scientist* 43 (1999): 377–391, and Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder, “Steps toward an ecology of infrastructure: Design and access for large information spaces,” in *Information System Research* 7 (1996), 111–134.
- 11 Charles Yu, “The Pre-pandemic Universe Was the Fiction,” *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/04/charles-yu-science-fiction-reality-life-pandemic/609985/>.
- 12 Michelle Murphy, “Infrastructures Built and Unbuilt,” <http://somatosphere.net/forumpost/infrastructures-built-and-unbuilt/>.
- 13 Murphy, “Infrastructures Built and Unbuilt.”
- 14 Hamid Dabashi, *Europe and Its Shadows: Coloniality After Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).
- 15 Achille Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” *Critical Inquiry*, April 13, 2020, <https://critiq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/>.
- 16 Andrea Muehlebach, “Toward a Social Infrastructure,” *e-flux: Liquid Utility*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/liquid-utility/259663/toward-a-social-infrastructure/>.
- 17 *Democracy Now!*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.democracynow.org/shows/2020/4/14>.
- 18 In the words of Noam Chomsky, “Principles have to be understood in connection with the human reality of the existing circumstances.” See “Deconstructed Special: The Noam Chomsky Interview,” *The Intercept*, October 31, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/10/31/deconstructed-special-the-noam-chomsky-interview/>.
- 19 The Invisible Committee, *Now*, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2017), 157.
- 20 Ibid., 158; our emphasis.
- 21 Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 1.
- 22 See Greig de Peuter and Christine Shaw, “Gathering Arrows: Deleuze’s Return,” in *TOPIA*, Vol. 16 (Fall 2006): 150–153.
- 23 See “Mandate” in “Archived Site” at [blackwoodgallery.ca](http://blackwoodgallery.ca). Fortuitously,

In a letter to the *New Yorker*, New Jersey teacher Kaya G. Morris responded to a chronicle of contagion fables by recounting a story of reading Albert Camus’ *The Plague* with her high school class. Morris writes,

My students, in their essays, all wanted to analyze the same scene: a moment in which Bernard Rieux, a doctor and the book’s narrator, escapes from the plague-ridden town with his partner in resistance, Jean Tarrou. They go for a swim in the sea. Their strokes synch up, and they find themselves in physical and mental sympathy with each other, “perfectly at one.” Afterward, they must return to their plague-stricken patients. My students were attracted to this scene not only because it is a lyrical respite from the horrors of the text but because it offers the possibility of respite as a form of resistance. The physical leap that Rieux and Tarrou take into the sea is made possible by an imaginative one: they free their minds, if only for a moment, from the grip of the plague. [Rieux] and Tarrou do not naively assume themselves to be free; they carve a form of freedom out of a landscape inimical to it. To resist the psychological effects of COVID-19, we need to find a form of imaginative freedom that, like Rieux and Tarrou’s, does not ignore the pestilence.<sup>28</sup>

In countless, unprecedented ways, the pestilential life of a virus is now making communicable much of what globalized capitalism tried to keep separate and unshared. Perhaps the question is less whether or not we can recover from the pandemic, but instead whether or not the pandemic can push humanity to recover from capitalism. As Georges Canguilhem makes clear in *The Normal and the Pathological*, “No recovery is ever a return to biological innocence. To recover is to establish new norms of living for oneself that are occasionally superior to the old ones.”<sup>29</sup> How can we establish new *and* superior social norms and expectations while learning to share *otherwise* through the intertwined processes of unbecoming-innocent *and* unbecoming-perpetrators that accompany COVID-19?<sup>30</sup>

... to be continued in **SDUK 07: TILTING (2)**.

- 24 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 56.
- 25 Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret, et al., *Women Who Make a Fuss: The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf*, trans. April Knutson (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), 26.
- 26 Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe.”
- 27 See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 28 Kaya G. Morris, “A Swim in the Sea,” *The New Yorker*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/13/letters-from-the-april-13-2020-issue>.
- 29 Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 187.
- 30 On involuntary perpetrators, see Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s magisterial rethinking of differential citizenship in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York and London: Verso, 2019). We will return to this concept again in part two of *TILTING*.



# The Year I Stopped Making Art

## Why the art world should assist artists beyond representation; in solidarity

Paul Maheke



Fly Amanita (poisonous).  
(*Amanita muscaria*, L.).

Nina L. Marshall, *The mushroom book: A popular guide to the identification and study of our commoner fungi* (New York: Doubleday, 1902).  
COURTESY BIODIVERSITY HERITAGE LIBRARY.

The year I stopped making art was the year I became a single parent. It was 1622, I got enslaved and was taken by force to North America to work in a field. It was 2003 and I had to travel to another country to get an abortion. The year I stopped making art was 1997. When I had to save thousands for my tritherapy and to provide for my mother who had just lost her job. It was 2017 when I fell short of money to pay the registration fee of the photo contest, of the art residency, of the entrance exam at the prestigious uni.

The year I stopped making art, I just stopped. I wasn't just being slowed down in my progress, I didn't take a detour, it just stopped. Life didn't throw me curveballs, at least not more than usual... My whole life felt like a curveball.

I had no more stamina. Not a single drop of blood left. My body collapsed. That's the year when I couldn't hold it together any longer. You failed me.

One day, it felt like the ground went missing and there was nothing below to prevent the fall from happening. This was the year I came out as trans. This was the year I had to pay for my gender-affirming surgery. This was the year I got scapegoated and shit-talked.

The year I stopped making art, it was before COVID-19. It didn't take a global pandemic to end my career. I just didn't manage to pay my tax return on time. It was 2019 and I had a bike accident on one of my shifts when I delivered food to people's doors. The year I stopped making art, it didn't take the wealthiest parts of the world going into total lockdown for me to be made redundant from the arts industry.

It was so mundane no one noticed.

No one noticed because I couldn't make an artwork out of it. It couldn't be turned into art. It just ended. My shows were cancelled and no one paid me and no one saw me.

I had made art for too long by now to be hired by any company outside the field. No restaurant would give a job to someone with little to no experience in hospitality.

The year I stopped making art is the year my secondary-school teacher decided I would make a good factory technician. This was the year my parents had to move further away, away from the centre, barely on the outskirts in suburbia. The year I stopped making art is when I realized I needed to speak several languages in order to be an artist, to have a computer with unlimited access to the internet and a smartphone to answer your emails on the go. The year I had to stop is the year I couldn't afford to commute to your museum to meet you. I was wrestling with depression and mental illness.

It was 1957 and my husband had to endorse every single expenditure made. It was 1578, I was thrown into a river, my hands tied to my feet. This was the year

they thought I was a witch. It was 2008 when I became homeless because my benefits were cut and you didn't pay me. It all stopped when I realized I was the only person of colour at your opening. It stopped when I had to clean floors of hotel rooms, airports, and trains to make ends meet. That's also when I saw you walk in the business lounge. I smelled your fragrance when you passed by. Turns out they sell a fake version of your perfume at the local market down the estate. I almost smelled like you the year I stopped making art. Me smelling like you was my camouflage. It didn't make a difference when, in 2020, I was forced to stop because of the fragile state of my finances.

The next day, you and I still smelled the same fig leaf-scented fragrance you spray in your hair and your neck every morning. You were at your office, in the museum, on the day our president decided to bar access to various institutions across the country to prevent a virus from spreading. You carefully applied the alcohol-based gel on your hands and your wrists, which would prevent you from getting contaminated. Then you went on to check your bank account on your phone. You thought, "It should be fine until it all ends." You had just collected rent money from your tenant, your paid sick leave, the bitcoins someone mined for you overnight. The year I stopped making art you started trading them.

In 2016 you made sure I wouldn't talk to anybody about what happened in the studio, at your office, in your flat, in the toilets at the fair. It's the year you repeatedly twisted my words. You made sure your verbal abuse would be deemed inuendoes to anyone hearing your side of the story. The side where your true power lies. This was the year I felt too ashamed to talk about it: the year I stopped making art was the year I was made to feel small. The year I was reminded that my visibility would never measure up to your financial stability.

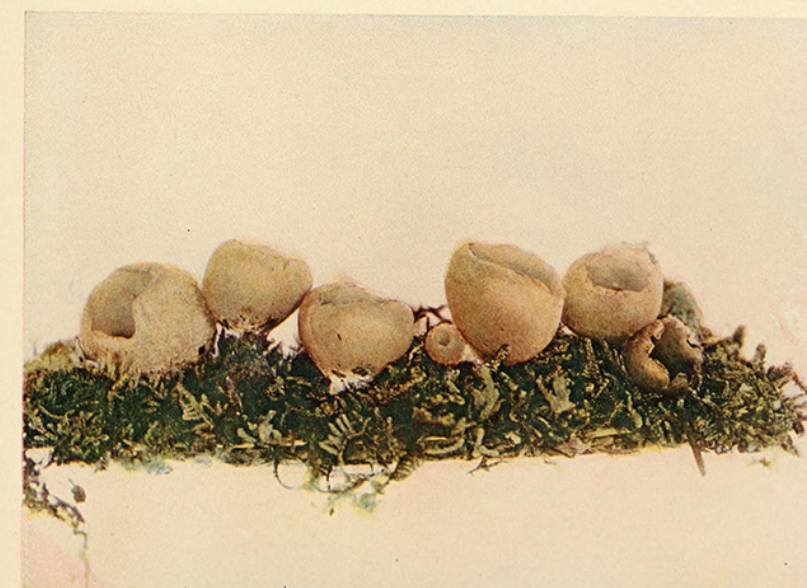
So when in the last months of 2020 I was home, still bed-bound, and the museum didn't pay me, I knew this was the year I would have to stop art. How was I to pay for my living expenses otherwise? This was going to last for a while, they said. "I am sorry to hear you're experiencing difficulties. It's a tough time for us all," you said. I wondered who you meant when you were saying "us" because I didn't feel like a part of your we.

The year I stopped making art is when I realized you couldn't care less because you didn't have to. How you were not part of this, because you never had to.

That's the year I gathered that when you were saying "us" you were meaning "them," and that was the reason why you were still able to talk and tweet when no one else could. You embody the savviest form of ignorance.



Golden Peziza (edible).  
(*Peziza aurantia*, Pers.)



*Peziza cadorata*, Pk. (edible).  
Reduced. See page 137.

Nina L. Marshall, *The mushroom book: A popular guide to the identification and study of our commoner fungi* (New York: Doubleday, 1902).  
COURTESY BIODIVERSITY HERITAGE LIBRARY.

The year I stopped making art is the year I was reminded I did not have a safety net or support structure to carry me through the testing of time like you did. That I was naive to think I could make it all the way through, just like you.

"Jog on!" You made a swerve and I couldn't follow. Leaving me to chew on the sillage of your perfume/our perfume.

The year I stopped making art is the year I almost smelled like you, only to realize that, to you, I was always gonna be the smell of forgery.

First published March 18, 2020,  
on Documentations.art.

**Paul Maheke** was born in Brive-la-Gaillarde and lives and works in London. In 2011 he completed a MA in art practice at l'École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Paris-Cergy and in 2015 a program of study at Open School East, London. Maheke was awarded the South London Gallery Graduate Residency 2015–16. His recent projects include Prix Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris; Performa 19, Abrons Art Center, New York; *Elements of Vogue!*, Chopo Museum, Mexico City; *OLOI*, Triangle France-Astérides, Marseille; *The Distance is Nowhere* (in collaboration with Sophie Mallett), ICA Miami; *Sensa* (in collaboration with Nkisi and Ariel Efraim Ashbel), Blockuniverse, London; Meetings on Art, performance art program at 58th Venice Biennale; *A Fire Circle for a Public Hearing*, Chisenhale Gallery, London; *Letter to a Barn Owl*, Kevin Space, Vienna; *A cris ouverts*, Biennale de Rennes; and *Give Up the Ghost*, Baltic Triennial 13, Tallinn.





tweet\_name: Mark Angelo C. Purio -> Ako man. Sabihin na natin that we can be emotionally carried away by this moment but still we can't deny the fact that a lot will be affected later on. #NoToABSCBNShutDown

retweet\_name: Xia // On break??? Hiatus??? -> @KAMSANGI thank you. read the whole thread. we're here for you guys. the air of uncertainty must be very hard... politics istg

tweet\_name: ThePirate -> Not good. For AB For the West For Canada For our Planet. Shortsighted move by @TeckResources panicked by hypocrisy and misguided attacks on the energy industry ONLY in Canada. Really NOT good. Fuck. <https://t.co/OVLUUqKeJR>

retweet\_name: -> hadlok kaayo ang uncertainty sa tanan bay -

Nicola Privato, *W.E.I.R.D.: Uncertainty* (video still), 2020. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

# W.E.I.R.D.: Uncertainty

Nicola Privato

*W.E.I.R.D.* (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) reflects the inherent bias in knowledge production, where a small fraction of the global population—roughly 15 per cent, the W.E.I.R.D demographic—speaks on behalf of the whole. This musical composition is necessarily (and deliberately) affected by that bias.

*W.E.I.R.D.* is a generative score for a soloist, unwittingly created by Twitter users, whose tweets are used in real-time for live performance. Privato's program downloads and displays tweets containing a keyword—in this case: "uncertainty." That keyword affects the score, which is projected live during the performance.

"Uncertainty," the first movement in this

three-part composition, will be followed by "Emergency" and "Identity." "Emergency" will be published in *TILTING (2)*; at time of writing, it appears in about 400 tweets per minute. Privato's keywords derive from the influence of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, whose writings on late modernity highlight a deep-seated sense of ambivalence and unease, where ambitions for order and rationality are always haunted by upheavals to traditional notions of economy, culture, and society.<sup>1</sup>

In "Uncertainty" the tweets first trigger the creation of the composition, bar by bar. Once most of the bars are laid out, the soloist starts to play, while tweets cause the score to oscillate between a finished version and a less rhythmically

and melodically refined shape. The score itself is influenced by uncertainty, which triggers it to action while preventing it from reaching a definite appearance.

Privato's work builds a dynamic between score and improvisation, notation and performance. Centred on the chaotic dynamics of globalized modernity, Privato draws on his traditional jazz training to consider how musical practice and performance can respond to turbulent change.

## Impotentiality and Resistance: The COVID-19 pandemic returns us to our impotentiality and hence to our capacity to resist

John Paul Ricco

In an essay titled "On What We Can Not Do" in his book *Nudities*, Giorgio Agamben makes clear that today (a present that is commonly referred to as the era of neoliberal rationality), we are alienated not from our potential to do, but from our impotentiality, that is: from our potential to not do. Agamben is well known for having identified this force of impotentiality as the most proper power of human beings. As he writes: "human beings are the living beings that, existing in the mode of potentiality, are capable of just as much of one thing as its opposite, to do just as [much as] to not do...human beings are the animals capable of their own impotentiality."

In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, in which millions of people have been laid off, are now working from home, or have had their work hours scaled back, they might not only be removed or distanced from their jobs, but might also be put a bit closer to finding, rediscovering, or amplifying their singular vocations.

Following Agamben's argument, we can therefore read the current situation not only as the forced estrangement from our potentiality, productivity, work, and so forth, but also as a possible opening to our "being able not to do"—which is to say our impotentiality. In no more than five short paragraphs, Agamben makes clear that this would be the highest form of poverty, a renewal of a capacity to resist, and an experience of freedom. This includes freedom from the neoliberal rationality that has led so many people over these past few weeks to work ever more relentlessly (in the many ways and forms possible under the rubric of "work"), and in doing so, to allow this state of exception to further advance and intensify what has unfortunately been the norm for quite some time.

Just as it is true that the novel coronavirus knows nothing of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is equally true that the virus is not the creator of the latter. Instead, both the knowledge and the creation of the pandemic (like any pandemic), belong to the human. In its extremely impure potentiality—that is, in its absolute reliance on a host organism in order to live and propagate—the coronavirus (like any virus) does not discriminate within the epidemiological parameters that define its microbiological domain, namely: animal and human bodies. Which is to say that as long as there are bodies to host it, or until there is a vaccine to prevent such viral hospitality, the virus will remain a contaminating and contagious disease that causes illness, and in some cases, death.

In its global rapaciousness, the virus is a force of destruction similar to capitalism.

In these first months of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it has often been asserted that the virus does not discriminate. By strangely ascribing agency to a thing that entirely lacks intentionality (especially since the virus is not even a living thing), commentators have wanted to find in the virus a common equality of contagion. But this is to conflate the epidemiological and the political, where in fact these two axes are most in need of being distinguished. For while epidemiologically speaking the virus does not discriminate, politically—that is, as an active virological agent cast within the global pandemic—it is made to operate in innumerable, discriminate ways, and thereby is made to inaugurate yet another chapter in the bio-political narrative.

The virus itself is that bio-viral entity that is entirely without potentiality, precisely because it does not have the power to not-be or not-do, but instead is constrained by the very limited things that it can do. In other words, the virus is either actualized or simply does not exist. When commentators (and many others) cast the virus as a sign of common equality, they not only confuse two different versions of equality (epidemiological and political), but also obfuscate the workings of the bio-political regime, and its division of life into productive life and bare life. That is: life worth saving and preserving, and life that is allowed to be abandoned or sacrificed. But perhaps more significantly, these voices also obscure what uniquely distinguishes human life from all other forms of life. Namely, impotentiality (i.e. the power or capacity to not-do, or to not-be), which is what all human life shares in common—prior, that is, to the bio-political division, noted above.

Rather than fighting over which of us living within the neoliberal rational order of productivity is, on one hand, more privileged, or on the other hand, closer to bare life, and rather than ascribing a force of equalization to a virus, now is the time to affirm and reclaim impotentiality as the only power that we truly share in common. It is this power that will return our incommensurable lives to their singularity and their vocations, which no political-economic or bio-political reason (let alone any virus) can ever provide the proper measure. When that happens we will be—together—contagiously resistant.

John Paul Ricco teaches at the University of Toronto. He volunteered this text in solidarity with *TILTING* contributors and the Blackwood.

Click the image above to see the full video.

<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

Nicola Privato is a Venice-based musician and digital artist. Privato studied jazz guitar at Trieste Conservatory, graduating in 2010. He has played national and international festivals (Veneto Jazz, JAM, JEFF, Ubi Jazz, Treviso Jazz, Palermo Jazz, Mediterraneo Jazz, and many others) while experimenting with electronics and programming languages, and developing interactive audiovisual installations for musicians exploring the ways technology, social media, and information can be integrated in music performances.



# Social Distancing in the Time of Social Media:

## A Series of Observations and Questions (which have probably changed a lot by the time you read this)

Christina Battle

As the number of COVID-19 cases rapidly swept across the country, health authorities first recommended, and then mandated, that we maintain social distance in order to help tackle the pandemic. What “social distancing” means, in practice, has differed across the country, and shifted a number of times over just two weeks: here in Alberta, we were first told to maintain a one-metre distance from others, then two; to limit groups to under 100, then to under fifty, and finally to under fifteen. Stay home and go online, we were told, intuiting that, for those of us with access to an internet connection, distancing ourselves offline didn’t necessarily mean disconnecting from one another entirely.

Just when we were seeing an increase in collective actions—[rallies in support of public healthcare](#) in the face of budget cuts, [blockades and demonstrations by Indigenous land protectors](#), [movements for divestment from fossil fuels at universities across the country](#), [successful lobbying to ban so-called conversion therapy](#), and many more initiatives in support of gender and sexual equality, Black justice, Indigenous rights, and climate change action—we’ve been told to avoid one another as a way to ensure our own health and safety. You’d think that this would be driving us apart, but it’s not, because simultaneously we’re reaching out and connecting in ways we hadn’t before. At the precise moment when COVID-19 is bringing the cracks in the system clearly into view, we’re sharing information unlike before. The inequitable reality of our labour force is surfacing, as employees who had been struggling with inadequate wages, part-time, and gig labour are revealed to be part of the [front-line workforce that ultimately keeps us all safe](#). As radical policies gaining traction online over the past two years are now primed to be tested as working models, we’re learning more about the system we’ve been born into and how it could be different: waiting around for employment insurance benefits after you were laid off? [A Universal Basic Income could have helped alleviate that](#). Are the rents that had been rapidly rising now impossible to afford

because of COVID-19? [Get on board with a rent strike](#). The solutions to our unequal and uncaring neoliberal system felt out of reach a couple of weeks ago—now, they’re being debated on prime-time news.

We’re quick to adapt to the push online, but as art galleries and organizations scramble to digitize their programming, what happens to the critiques around the greater impacts of the internet? How are the discussions about data collection, surveillance, and the commodification of “public” space—so prevalent a few weeks ago—[being taken up now](#)? What does it mean that a large percentage of civilization is now turning to online networks all day long? Online companies have already had to adjust: [Netflix, Amazon, and YouTube, for example, reduced their streaming rates because of COVID-19](#). What questions are being asked when workshops are encouraged to move onto Zoom—a platform [known for its vulnerability to hacking](#), and whose [privacy policies give the company license to record and track data](#) with less transparency than we demand from other applications? Are we considering the repercussions for privacy and access when programming takes place on Facebook Live; or when a gallery plans a virtual tour of an exhibition via Google Arts & Culture or Chrome? Where do all of those concerns about the inherent problematics of the internet end up?

What happened to the conversation about the [300 million tons of carbon dioxide generated in order to keep the internet running](#)? [Calculations of the immense environmental toll of simple internet functions like search engine use were already staggering before we migrated our work, school, shopping, and social lives into the digital sphere—what are they now?](#) Even before COVID-19, [the carbon footprint of the internet and the systems supporting it](#) was about the same as that of the global airline industry (expected to double over the next five years). What if, after COVID-19 passes, we realize that all of our social distancing has actually made the climate

crisis worse? What does this realization mean in a time when we’re sharing posts about how clean Earth is going to be when all the humans [#juststayhome](#)? [It’s a fairy tale we’re telling ourselves](#) in order to cope, but the consequences of ignoring it might not be easy to reconcile with once the crisis is over. More than ever before, while we’re increasing our reliance on social media, we need conversations about [lessening the carbon burden generated by the internet of things](#). We need to keep asking ourselves, especially if this continues longer than we expect it to (not that any of us know quite what to expect): where might all of this end up?

Still, our turn to the online at this particular moment is shifting the status quo, and it’s useful to keep up the momentum. In some ways we’re still struggling to find a single voice that rings in unison online, but there are indications that it is starting to happen.

We’re seeing the repercussions of the persistent cuts to healthcare that many provinces have experienced over the years, and when faced with the choice—along with online public pressure—we’re choosing doctors, nurses, cleaning staff, and [our national healthcare system over the corporations that have been screwing us over for decades](#).

COVID-19 is helping us to clarify the things that we care about most, and about what really matters, and the balance of power is shifting. Take the group of [Edmonton nurses who refused to work without proper safety gear](#), and who could blame them when they’re asked to risk their lives for us now, while knowing that [many will be laid off once this is over](#)? The slowly unravelling death trap of neoliberalism has always been a threat—has always demanded decisive action—but COVID-19’s grip over us is much more immediate. It truly has most of us shook. We realize now that [the work that matters is being done by workers](#), and we really only want to hear from those who offer tangible solutions—those who can help to take care of us going into the future.

In some ways, the internet is behaving like the great equalizer it promised in its early days. It’s important to be wary of this promise. The very online systems helping us to rally together and fight back against austerity are themselves [owned and operated by corporations](#)—and right now, while we’re relying on them even more than before, those corporations are primed to make a mint. But this virus has shown us that during this moment, our collective voice is worth a lot. In fact, it’s worth everything to them, too. Over recent years, we’ve pushed and pulled and tested the system and [companies now recognize that how we feel about them matters](#). We’ve shown them the power that we hold when we collectively call them out on their shit. Now, in the time of global pandemic, they’re terrified that we might turn on them entirely, because they know that their economic dreams can’t be realized without us. They know that, really, we’re the ones who hold all the power, and when we’re connected, that power is beyond their ability to control. They’ll try, but there are too many of us tuning in right now, that’s one major difference between now and before.

Social media, with all its faults, is helping to make us stronger at the precise moment there might be a chance to remake the world in a way that is better than before. By forcing us indoors, COVID-19 has helped provide some much needed clarity, and we’re already seeing the impacts it could have: [like the return of Airbnb rentals to overly stretched real-estate markets](#); the passing of [the NDP’s national pharmacare motion](#); and the establishment of [affordable internet access for low-income families](#). For now, social media is providing the space for us to imagine how things might finally begin to shift. But the window might not be available for long, and governments in power are using the same moment to chip away at [public services while bailing out companies that directly contribute to the climate crisis](#). Now is the time to rally around the urgently needed solutions for lessening the network’s impact on our environment, for recognizing the limitations of relying on the internet as a tool for progressive change, and for building something new.

Christina Battle’s research and artistic work consider the parameters of disaster: looking to it as action, as more than mere event, and instead as a framework operating within larger systems of power. Through this research she imagines how disaster could be utilized as a tactic for social change and as a tool for reimagining how dominant systems might radically shift. She is based in Edmonton, and has exhibited internationally in festivals and galleries, most recently at the John and Maggie Mitchell Art Gallery, Edmonton (curatorial); Latitude 53, Edmonton; Harbourfront Centre, Toronto; Capture Photography Festival, Vancouver; Forum Expanded at the Berlinale, Berlin; Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga; Trinity Square Video, Toronto; and Nuit Blanche, Toronto.

### Links in order of appearance

- [cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/registered-nurses-alberta-rally-1.5463328](https://cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/registered-nurses-alberta-rally-1.5463328)
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- [jacobinmag.com/2020/03/coronavirus-low-wage-workers-front-lines-grocery-store?fbclid=IwAR0HTqO3g1MOeQWj-6-Eqx3aQ4HhCyoYsAwysglQHckzUmahYoj-VBQIWDg](https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/coronavirus-low-wage-workers-front-lines-grocery-store?fbclid=IwAR0HTqO3g1MOeQWj-6-Eqx3aQ4HhCyoYsAwysglQHckzUmahYoj-VBQIWDg)
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- [twitter.com/DonDavies/status/1238533895756361728?s=20](https://twitter.com/DonDavies/status/1238533895756361728?s=20)
- [cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/cheap-internet-low-income-family-1.4695281](https://cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/cheap-internet-low-income-family-1.4695281)
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Opposite:  
Kimberly Edgar, *Hold Still*, 2020.  
Watercolour and acrylic ink.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST.

**Kimberly Edgar** is a queer visual  
artist, cartoonist, illustrator,  
and designer living in Dawson City.

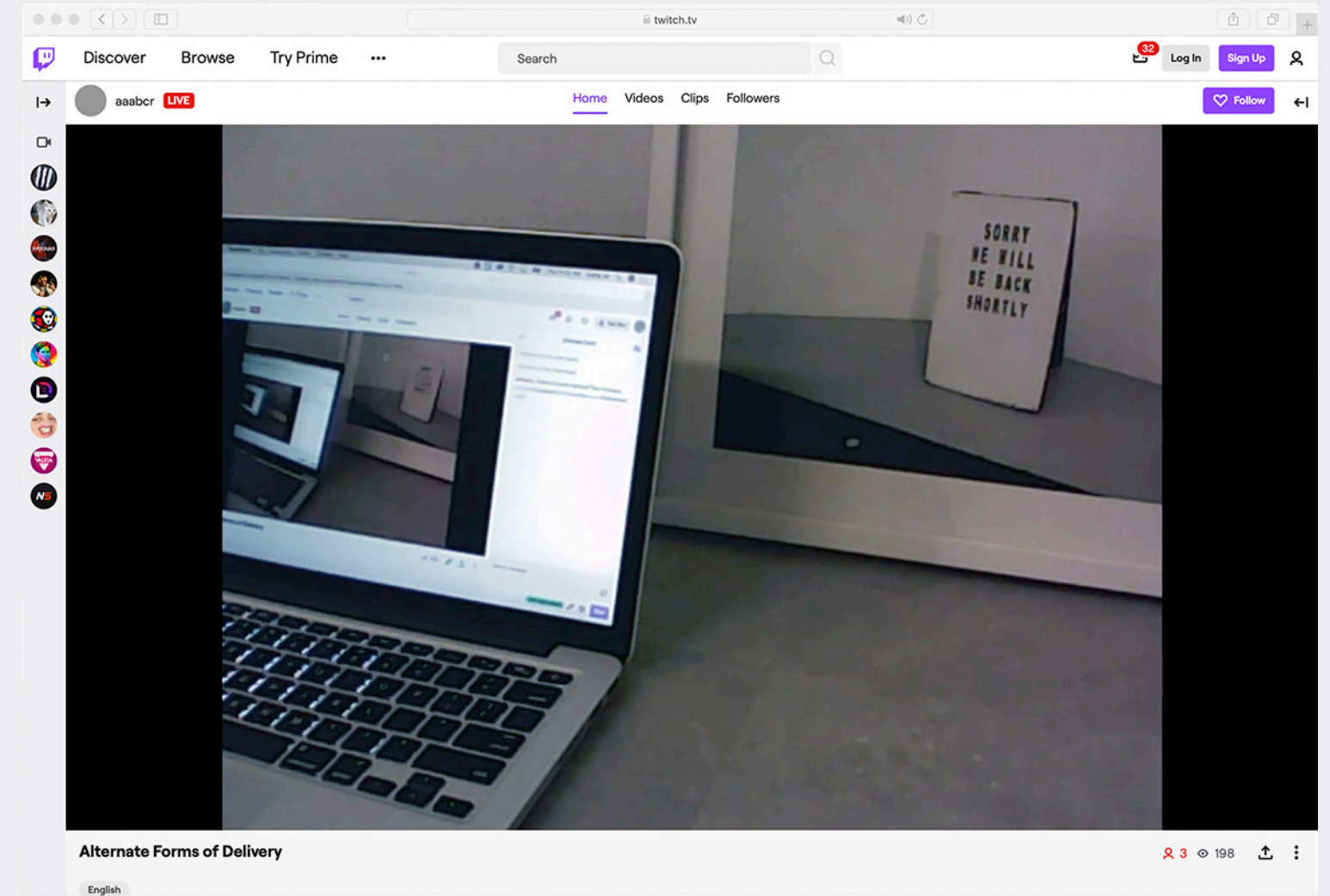


# Alternate Forms of Delivery

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Inbal Newman, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee



Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Inbal Newman, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee, *Alternate Forms of Delivery*, 2020. Laptop, framed photograph, signage. COURTESY THE ARTISTS.



Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Inbal Newman, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee, *Alternate Forms of Delivery*, 2020. Twitch livestream. COURTESY THE ARTISTS.

*If you did not desire to go, there would be a chance that the door would open.*  
—Hélène Cixous, “Attacks of the Castle”

Over the past eleven months, we have co-opted an underutilized room (418) in OCAD University’s 205 Richmond Street West building in Toronto as a site for a series of fifteen exhibitions. These exhibitions have explored various forms of collective authorship and such exhibition strategies as the closed gallery and the empty gallery.

The last of these exhibitions comes as the COVID-19 pandemic has our master’s degrees in art and design coming to a strange end. With the announcement of the university’s closure, we were given three

days’ notice to document or remove what we needed, with communications from the administration repeatedly referring to “alternate forms of delivery.” In this context we installed *Alternate Forms of Delivery*, an improvised closed-gallery exhibition consisting of a livestream emanating from room 418. Hosted at [twitch.tv/aaabcr](https://www.twitch.tv/aaabcr), it shows a photograph of a sign reading “SORRY WE WILL BE BACK SHORTLY” and a computer viewing the same streaming video, which intermittently displays an error message.

Our overriding concerns with economy of means, salvaging and reuse, and collaboration take on new meaning amidst the present scarcity of resources and dis-

appearance of indoor public space. The photograph is a remnant of a past exhibition, where it was placed outside the door when the gallery was open and taken inside when it was closed. The computer was signed out hours before the closure. The invitations were produced at a home-based print shop and picked up from the porch.

A curious combination of solidarity and class dynamics arises as, amidst the glitches and complications of operating remotely, we rely on allies to keep the project going. At one end of the institutional hierarchy, a sympathetic security guard or custodian—one of the often unacknowledged workers who are the last remain-

ing inhabitants of these institutional buildings—who has periodically refreshed the browser on the computer in the room. At the other end, a faculty member who was able to secure access through official procedures and restore the stream when a major outage nearly ended the project altogether. (A postscript to a postscript, the second phase of the exhibition is marked by more oblique angles and the strange amber hue of auxiliary lighting.)

The printed invitation shows five isolated faces, their outlines vibrating with the RGB fringing of the webcams that connect the locked-up exhibition space to the world outside and the institution’s denizens to each other.

Artists, designers, and tinkerers **Aisha Ali**, **Atanas Bozdarov**, and **Craig Rodmore**’s collusion/practice employs strategies of repair and modification; improvisation; mimicry, reproduction, and repetition; collection and organization; chance and improvisation. Exploring multiple authorship and the composition and function of the gallery and printed matter through the collective production of seen and unseen exhibitions and publications, over the past year they have produced, with **Florence Yee**, a series of fifteen exhibitions incorporating sculpture, installation, video, sound, photography, and graphic design. They thank Ali Gadeer and Sunny Kerr for their contributions to this project.



# Who Is Inside (Your Pandemic): Revisiting the Residues of Global Supremacy

Amy Fung

The first time I heard was in late December 2019. I was on the phone with my mother and she was rapidly chatting about a deadly flu spreading across central China. My mother and her friends across Vancouver, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan were non-stop talking about it over FaceTime and WhatsApp. The information they had (through Chinese social networks) and the information I had (through English social networks) were already telling two very different stories.

At first, I didn't find much information on the symptoms or the impacts of this new virus. It sounded a lot like SARS and MERS, which, to me, existed more as memories of anti-Asian racism than a second coming. During SARS, I never once thought about getting sick as I was more concerned with the day-to-day hostilities from angry Albertans. Even now, more than fifteen years later, I was more aware of the external threat to my racial difference than to an attack on my immune system.

My difference and my bodily systems are interrelated, especially when there are increasing incidents of white settlers attacking Asian ones. Despite not knowing their actual heritage, the suspects explain their actions in the name of protecting public safety. Increasingly, people of Asian descent in North America are beaten up, spat on, and violently targeted. Under white settler logic, public safety does not include my difference.

I heard about the virus because my father lives in Hong Kong. He has lived there since 1974, fleeing with his wife (my mother) and their two oldest children from the Communist regime in China. Under international humanitarian law, the millions of

people fleeing China's authoritarian government were not deemed to be refugees. No country would take them, so Hong Kong grew exponentially beyond capacity and refugee camps were set up all over the city. Even then, the world looked on, reasoning that this was a national, and not an international issue. The willful inability to recognize Asian suffering as a global problem is not new.

Canada, like many white settler societies from the United States to Australia for the past two hundred years, preferred to imagine their nationals, be it refugees or citizens, as whites only. Early Asian settlers in these societies were subject to fear-mongering and dehumanization from the state and their neighbours, in what is commonly referred to as "yellow peril" in North America. From labour exploitation and exclusionary taxation to internment, Asian suffering has never been legible here.

I heard about the virus because my father has been in and out of hospitals since fall 2019. In an act of solidarity with the surge of student protests, he was active in marching with the millions of citizens who opposed the controversial extradition bill and the encroaching heavy hand of China making its way into Hong Kong politics. During the increasingly violent escalations between demonstrators and police, my father had a heart attack while running away from police-released tear gas. He collapsed in the street and strangers brought him to the hospital.

While we were awaiting news on whether we needed to leave for Hong Kong, my mother informed me that he had two stints put in and was doing much better. No need to visit. Not yet. Finish your term and go visit him in the summer. Her fear

was that if we went during a politically tumultuous time, we would not be able to return.

I heard about the virus because my father then had a stroke. My 77-year-old mother bought herself a plane ticket, but needed to get her final affairs in order. She just got a new dog and wanted to wait for him to turn twelve weeks old to get fully vaccinated. I flew to Vancouver the week before she was supposed to leave to see her off. The fear of the virus was already in Vancouver as news was quickly spreading beyond central China and into Hong Kong and most of the neighbouring Asian countries and cities. My mother was preparing for this trip like it was her last. I came to help her consolidate her banking accounts, her will, and most importantly for her, the well-being of her new dog. I was going to take him back with me to Ontario.

When we got to a near empty Vancouver airport, we were told the dog, a six-pound ball of fur, was suddenly too big for the cabin. No slurs were used, but I felt covered in the common and unspoken residue of being unfairly singled out. It unfolds on the micro level and it is imbued through the systemic level. Sometimes this residue appears after somebody says something so unconscious and deeply rooted that nothing you say will ever pierce their thoughts about you and "your kind." Sometimes this residue splashes off of someone who is proving how "woke" they are by going out of their way to infantilize you. Spending three days in Vancouver in January, I felt this residue all over my face and body as we prepared for my mother's departure. It was remarkably familiar. Other people's repressed hostilities and unreasonable

fears were leaving marks all over us. From airline staff to strangers in stores, people moved their bodies away out of fear. They looked scared (or was it disgusted?) to have to talk to us for longer than necessary. This is how we now treat each other in cramped aisles at the grocery stores or in line anywhere. There are government-led snitch lines set up in place to watch each other and I wonder how this is going to disproportionately impact racialized people. This residue leaves traces everywhere.

I had to leave the dog behind. A white man and his miniature poodle ahead of us had no problems at the Air Canada ticket counter, but I was stopped. My mother pleaded with them, but the counter agent and her supervisor said that our family problems were not hers to deal with. They said they had to think of the safety and well-being of all the customers. For them, that clearly did not include us.

I shared the news of the virus and its residue with everyone I could. I have written the airline numerous times. I posted updates on social media. I had phone calls with friends. I shared the story over dinner and coffee. My peers had very little to say. They were sad or sorry or scared to see someone in their age group with a parent being hospitalized. They wondered when the dog was coming. They wondered if I still wanted to visit Hong Kong. They heard me, but they did not see the world I saw.

My mother's trip to Hong Kong was indefinitely postponed a few days later. The dog situation was a factor, but the city suddenly went on lockdown. By late January, no visitors were allowed in hospitals. Schools were closing their doors. The majority of the city's 7.5 million people were already practicing social distancing in one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Her worries of being stranded were inching toward reality.

By late February, infection and deaths were soaring across Europe, the UK, and North America. In other words, this became a "global" issue. By this point, it had been almost two months since I first heard about the virus. It had been over a month since South Korea and the United States registered their first cases on the exact same day, January 20. The United States, like much of the Western world, did not believe that the sudden deaths of more than 2,000 Asians were a substantive warning. Even if Asia accounts for more than half of the world's human population, the crisis was not yet global until it reached white-majority nations.

By now, everyone I know has heard of, if not directly felt the devastations of, this virus. Most appear to be struggling with this uncertainty. For others, this is not new; this uncertainty has been a primary reality. What you could not imagine is now our shared reality. Let us not forget each other.

Amy Fung is a writer and organizer working across intersections of histories and identities. She is currently a doctoral student at Carleton University and received her master's in English and film studies from the University of Alberta in 2009 with a specialization in criticism, poetics, and the moving image. Her writings have been commissioned and published by festivals, museums, and publications nationally and internationally. Her first book, *Before I Was a Critic, I Was a Human Being* (Artspeak and Book\*hug, 2019), addresses Canada's mythologies of multiculturalism and settler colonialism through the lens of a national art critic.

amidst

d'bi.young anitafrika

Long poem on following page.

d'bi.young anitafrika is an international dub poet, theatre practitioner and drama interventionist who is committed to creating and nurturing art that ritualizes acts of recovery from violence inflicted upon the people and the planet.



dear ronka  
I am here  
listening deeply  
moving slowly  
preparing diligently  
growing steadily  
& learning, learning, learning  
this *house arrest* feels very different  
from the romanticized version of self-imposed isolation  
I longed for just a few weeks ago  
boris just announced that london is on lockdown  
immediately!  
I find myself increasingly on the inside of these passing days  
that flu that I caught out of nowhere two weeks ago  
I didn't think twice about it  
ginger, garlic, turmeric, rest, repeat  
while yesterday my right tonsil began to ache  
and I was enveloped instantly in the wretched arms  
of panic!  
reading, conceptualizing and dreaming feels weighted now  
like my chest under water  
and I keep telling myself that it's all psychosomatic  
there is nothing the matter  
I don't have a cough or a fever or breathing difficulties  
this moment ronka, it demands differently of my watery self  
*every time I hear my housemate cough, my body freezes*  
I know you understand my situation  
and can appreciate my withdrawal  
and maybe are even similarly positioned  
(or maybe not)  
that being said  
I would love to see you but I can't  
because london is on lockdown  
last night  
I dreamt of a black horse so big  
I thought it was a bear  
with a black crochet caparison  
its rider,  
an ancient womxn  
focused on looking over the field  
to the left of me  
she surveyed the land  
then spun on her horse  
both galloped away to the right of me  
and disappeared into the forest  
the dream was so vivid  
I was convinced it was real  
I saw them disappear  
as I stood in awe  
I have been in my tiny forest cottage  
for the past few days under *house arrest*  
we are running out of food  
but I can't bring myself to go to the shops  
I am paralyzed by fear  
I've chosen to spring-clean instead  
and cook lengthy meals  
I tried to do grocery shopping online  
the deliveries were booked up to six weeks from today  
did I tell you that  
out of nowhere I developed a flu  
but it was only the flu  
people are panic-shopping and there is not enough  
in the stores for the elderly and most vulnerable  
the news keeps telling us that  
I don't know for sure because I can't bring myself to go outside  
I remember when I went last week  
there was no hand sanitizer, no tissue paper, and no anti-bacterial wipes  
I feel the way I feel when I'm on the pin-edge of decision-making  
except there is no decision to make  
and all my engagements have been postponed or cancelled  
just like that, I am reminded that death also sometimes comes just like that  
people are dying ronka, in the hundreds and thousands  
people are dying all over the world (and always have, and always will)  
I wonder if we'll make it through this  
growing up in shorthood lane, grandspen avenue

the precarity was everyday salt (it never ever disappeared, lessened maybe, but not disappear)  
my grandmothers both were close friends  
till a lover came between them  
incurring my father's mother's wrath upon me  
my father never left sixteen  
even though he was already twenty at my birth  
my mother almost a year past fifteen  
the garrison — home  
joy — home  
separateness — home  
love — home  
difference — home  
economic scarcity — home  
collective — home  
physical violence — home  
family — home  
*I am away from my family right now*  
*away from my mom and the boys and my brother*  
*an entire continent and oceans away*  
in shorthood lane, in jack's hill, in maxfield avenue,  
I began early to make space on the  
inside where on the outside  
lurked monsters of the touching kind  
wounds that heal in crooked ways  
but do heal  
class-crossed tracks and I had a penchant for thought  
'she bright'  
'maybe not pretty but bright'  
prestige and high school hand-in-hand  
the best in jamaica they said  
'the best of what exactly'  
the best of the wealthy (except I was not in that group)  
*I think about the wealthy right now*  
*how are the wealthy being affected by this moment in ourstory*  
*I think of the working people, the so-called 'unskilled' workers*  
*(not so 'unskilled' now right)*  
*do the working people always bear the brunt of disaster*  
*I wonder who will carry the wealthy and capitalism on broad-backs*  
*if all the poor people die*  
*whose blood would be sucked dry by inequity*  
prestige and high school hand-in-hand  
but my own hands were not held for fear of 'ghetto contamination'  
I left jamaica when I was fifteen  
and lost and found and lost and found and lost and found myself  
all the way here to london  
twenty-seven years later  
along the way  
I chose to fall in and out of love  
I chose to have children, now fifteen and eleven  
they grow as I navigate new, sometimes hostile waters  
here in these waters is where I choose to be  
in the forest, deep in the forest  
with the trees, with my thoughts  
with my doubts and fears  
watching them fall away from me  
like the leaves of grandmother oak  
feeling exposed without them  
in the forest, deep in the forest  
and now not knowing  
I have never known what the future holds  
somehow that reality is now *a reality*  
funny thing about life, isn't it ronka  
waiting cuts small scars into my hope  
I tell myself life is the choice I choose to continue to make  
while these vulnerabilities  
swim puddles around my feet  
in which I soak  
I don't know the names of the trees  
in the woods  
just outside my window  
but I do know  
they are  
my salvation  
amidst  
desolation



# Four Thieves Vinegar

Sydney Shen

Four thieves' vinegar is an elixir fabled to have been developed by French grave robbers during an historical outbreak of bubonic plague, to protect themselves from infection by the corpses they plundered. Perfumed with a recreated four thieves' vinegar recipe, Shen's installation revisits medieval folk plague cures, considering their continuity and relevance amid contemporary notions of belief, health, and self-care.

**Sydney Shen's** sculptures probe contradictions such as fear and wonder, pain and pleasure, sacred and profane. She destabilizes motifs of the macabre, especially those that test the limits of the body, to evoke ambivalent states. Recent solo exhibitions include *Onion Master*, New Museum, New York; and *Every Good Boy Does Fine*, Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna. Shen is a 2019–20 Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Workspace resident. She received the 2019 Jerome Foundation Emerging Artist Fellowship, Queens Museum, New York; and the 2018 New Works Grant, Queens Art Fund, New York. She graduated from the Cooper Union in 2011.

Facing page, clockwise from top left:

1. **Untitled.** Lavender, ribbon, garlic, baby's breath.

Before germs were known to cause disease, miasma theory suggested sickness was spread by inhaling foul-smelling vapours. Medicinal plants and herbs serve as miasma-thwarting scents.

2. Left to right: *Peccatum me quotidie; I Want My Scream to Count; My Corpse Burns and the Fire is Sweet; Crudelissima Doglia.* 3D-printed plastic, black velvet flocking, ribbon.

A series of flyswatters anticipate death and decomposition. The swatting mesh designs are inspired by the melancholic Italian early-Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo, who developed unusual remedies to alleviate his health conditions, which were seen as lapses of spirituality.

3. **Timor Mortis Conturbat Me.** CNC cut and faux-finished wood, star anise.

A manhole cover engraved with *Timor Mortis Conturbat Me* (fear of death disturbs me), a refrain common to medieval poetic laments. References to sanitation infrastructure carry across suspended Shaker-style chairs in the installation, which evoke the curative folk advice to "sit in the sewers."

4. **Four Thieves Vinegar (detail).** Citrus, cloves, glass urinal, baby's breath, four thieves vinegar.

Shen's recreated four thieves' vinegar recipe is diffused in repurposed urine-collection vessels. Bodily fluids and odours are a main target of miasma theory; here, the collection vessel is rendered as protector rather than perpetrator.



Sydney Shen, *Four Thieves Vinegar*, installation view, Springsteen, Baltimore, 2017. COURTESY THE ARTIST.





# How to Swim in a Living Room

Adam Bierling



Adam Bierling, *How to Swim in a Living Room*, 2020. PHOTO: MARCUS MARRIOTT. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

## Prelude

In the absence of a pool, swim in a living room. In the absence of a living room, swim in a bath. In the absence of a bath, swim in a shower. In the absence of a shower, swim in a bed. In the absence of a bed, swim in open air. Allow two metres distance around yourself for all swimming activities.

Questions to meditate on: What is a playful swimmer? How does a swimmer play? Who am I without a pool? What is the pool without me? Why does water change me the way it does? How does it do that thing to make me so embodied? What does losing yourself feel like? What does finding yourself feel like? How can I fill all this space? Where is the nearest body of water? How does a playful body swim?

**Adam Bierling** is an artist, writer, social worker, and curator living in what is known as Toronto. Their work explores relationships of desire, freakishness, cross-species love, alter egos, and queered kin making. They are a recipient of the Delaney Family Entrance Scholarship at OCAD University, where they are currently pursuing a BFA in criticism and curatorial practice and a minor in gender and sexuality studies.

## Performance #1

*How to Swim in a Living Room*

1. Imagine the air around you into water. Float on top of it. Dive into it.
2. Lie on top of a surface so there is water around you and under you.
3. Swim 10 lengths of front crawl, breathing every five strokes.
4. Swim 10 lengths of breaststroke, breathing on the upstroke.
5. Repeat actions 3 & 4 until the swim is over.

## Performance #2

*How to Swim as a Siren*

1. Create a list of songs to sing as you lure sailors into the watery depths.
2. Sing a line of song every time your head is underwater. Repeat until the playlist is finished.

Playlist:

*Come Away With Me*, Norah Jones  
*Movies*, Weyes Blood  
*Come All You Sailors*, The Wailin' Jennys

## Performance #3

*How to Swim in a Bed*

1. Gather water from the nearest lake.
2. Pour the water into a vessel, place it on your bed.
3. Take a deep breath and submerge your face in the water.
4. Hold your breath for as long as possible.





Opposite:  
Kimberly Edgar, *A Fever, A Crisis*,  
2020. Watercolour and acrylic ink.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST.





Opposite:  
Noelle Hamlyn, *Lifers* (detail from series), 2019. Lifejackets with custom tailoring. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

Holding credentials in craft, fine art and costuming, **Noelle Hamlyn** uses craft practices to mediate embodied experience and memory. She blends the technical and conceptual, recognizing hands respond to their tacit subjective experience. Intrigued by textures, ideas, the world, and being in it, she believes objects have power to absorb time, conjure experience, and hold story. Her work has been recognized as a Salt Spring National Art Prize 2017 finalist, best in show at Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition (2014, 2019), and supported by residencies at the Banff Centre, Harbourfront Centre, Burren College of Art, Salt Spring Arts Council, and Barefoot College, Tanzania, where she rebuilt bee-keeping suits as social enterprise.

## A Job Guarantee

D.T. Cochrane

We are in a new depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic: untold numbers of businesses have closed, unemployment has skyrocketed, opportunities for contract workers have disappeared.

Economic depression creates problems in three distinct but entangled spheres: the financial, the material, and the psychological. A job guarantee offers a potent solution to all three.

The financial system requires a continual churn of money. Rents paid to landlords become mortgage payments to banks become debt service to other banks become payments to employees and shareholders and on and on it goes. The global financial crisis of 2007–08 showed what happens when money stops flowing. Defaults on questionable mortgages cascaded through the financial system until some major companies went bankrupt. Job losses, foreclosures, and evictions followed. To prevent a repeat of the harm caused in 2008–09 when money stopped flowing, we need immediate, massive injections of money.

A universal basic income (UBI) is one proposition to provide some of that liquidity—to keep money flowing. More importantly, UBI addresses the material and psychological effects of a depression by ensuring everyone has at least some of the money they need to survive.

But we need more than a universal income. We need a job guarantee.

A major reason for this is that money does not just circulate. It accumulates.

We have a “trickle up” economy. Most of us spend all, almost all, or even more than we earn. Some of it is for survival. Some of it is for pleasure or to modestly improve our quality of life. And some of it is spent succumbing to marketing and other social pressures. The money circulates as businesses pay workers and buy supplies. However, portions of the money get siphoned off, where it accumulates under the control of the already wealthy. The primary purpose of this money is to attract yet more money, which is achieved through both passive investment in financial assets and active intervention in every facet of society.

While some of the money controlled by the wealthy gets invested into production, it also gets spent lobbying politicians for things like elimination of environmental protections and corporate tax breaks. Under the pandemic-created economic conditions, the wealthy will see even fewer opportunities for profit via production. As all kinds of jobs are disappearing, very few will be created.

At this moment a job guarantee would take advantage of the fact that there is plenty of work to be done and there are plenty of people to do it.

To facilitate a job guarantee, the federal government could provide money to municipalities, which are best placed to know what kind of jobs they need performed. There is much work to be done to deal with the current pandemic, as well as the climate crisis, caring for our aging population, and other social sea changes. We could pay people to train as healthcare workers, to phone elderly people isolating alone, to make public art, to clean up orphaned oil wells, and to perform many other necessary jobs that profit-seeking companies would never create.

A job guarantee would add even more money into the economy. While a basic income could provide for the bare minimum, a job guarantee on top would provide additional income and benefits in exchange for work. This would also establish a wage and benefit floor.

A job guarantee also has the psychological benefit of keeping people engaged in skills acquisition, occupying their time and reducing risks of isolation and boredom, and offering workers a sense of purpose amid great uncertainty. Unemployment is psychologically damaging. The pandemic-induced economic depression will generate a mental-health crisis unless we get people back to work.

How would we ensure the wealthy do not derive unfair advantages from this injection of money? Taxes. Because of our “trickle up” system, money created to hire everyone who needs a job would still accumulate under the control of the wealthy. This is why highly progressive taxes are needed. Reducing the wealth of the wealthy with taxes—thereby reducing their spending on socially detrimental things like obscene luxuries and political lobbyists—ensures that job-guarantee funding benefits those who need it most.

D.T. Cochrane is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto. He volunteered this text in solidarity with *TILTING* contributors and the Blackwood.



# “Deception is a co-effect which cannot be neglected.”<sup>1</sup>

Ruth Skinner

I'm spending a lot of time reading about how psychics and conspiracy theorists are wrangling with this event.

In *New Dark Age*, James Bridle dedicates a chapter to conspiracy. He recounts observing the flight patterns of UK aircraft as they departed asylum seekers or carried out surveillance-gathering missions. Bridle holds these very concrete airspace activities—expulsion, spying, and their corresponding carbon impacts—alongside the suspicions of chemtrail soothsayers. “Something strange is afoot,” he writes. “In the hyper-connected, data-deluged present, schisms emerge in mass perception. We're all looking at the same skies, but we're seeing different things.”<sup>2</sup>

Bridle mentions GCHQ Bude in Cornwall, which Wikipedia identifies as a “government satellite ground station and eavesdropping centre.” GCHQ Bude is located near one of the first transatlantic undersea cables. Edward Snowden famously reported on its info-gathering operation, codename Tempora: a computer system that archives and observes fibre-optic communications, sharing its data with the National Security Agency. *Tempora*, plural of Latin *tempus* (“time; period”). We're now undeniably aware of the age of information compromise, permeability, and permanence.

The town of Bude was also the final home of artist and occultist Pamela Colman Smith, who illustrated the canonical Rider-Waite-Smith tarot deck. Last year I had the opportunity to visit the house where she died, impoverished and indebted. It's now a pub, so I ordered lunch and sat to take in its beautiful big windows, over-painted door jambs, and slot machines. Mid-bite, an electrical socket in the room emitted a snap-bang loud enough to startle everyone into silence, followed by nervous laughter. That electrical discharge feels much more prescient now: an oracular hiccup in a network of information-laden, sea-buffed circuitry.

Electrical discharges abound in the present as telecom companies commit to uncapping our data. My sessional teaching contract, like everyone's, has pivoted on line. We're wrapping this Digital Literacies class with a week on conspiracy. Bridle's chapter is our reading. Artist Christina Battle gamely upholds an earlier invitation to guest lecture by organizing a wonderful

remote activity and discussion. Students gather and share images of what they've been reading online (memes, panic-buying, news articles, their own Zoom faces). They talk through their experiences of physical distance/hyper-connectivity. It's good to see all their faces. Battle comments that among all the information circulating about the environmental effects of COVID-19, no one seems to be speaking about the carbon footprint of the internet anymore.

*The cobweb cloak of Time has dropped between the world and me, The Rainbow ships of memory have drifted out to sea.*<sup>3</sup>

In this moment, thinking about the seemingly fraught relation between seen and unseen, natural and supernatural (and our collective inability to distinguish which is which), a series of photographs fix in my mind as potentially useful. They perform as a Rorschach test for discerning—deciding how the present is beginning to feel; they present a visual mantra for settling into that unsettling feeling. These images constitute Plate IX from Camille Flammarion's 1907 text, *Mysterious Psychic Forces: An Account of the Author's Investigations in Psychical Research, Together with Those of Other European Savants*. Plate IX is captioned: “METHOD USED BY EUSAPIA TO SURREPTITIOUSLY FREE HER HAND.”<sup>4</sup>

I found *Mysterious Psychic Forces* at the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle, one of the oldest independent libraries in Britain. Flammarion's book is shelved among esotericism and parapsychology. Histories of witchcraft, tomes on spiritualism, poltergeist activities, and studies of extrasensory perception are catalogued between continental theory, to the left, and psychoanalysis, to the right. The book's placement demonstrates the perpetual, meaningful proximity of systems and methodologies that are expected to perform distance. Nearby Flammarion is a battered copy of Henri Bergson's 1889 thesis *Time and Free Will*. Somewhere between 1948 and the present, according to loan stamps, a reader underlined Bergsonian fragments on potential futures: “we shall have lost a great deal... the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities.”<sup>5</sup>

Flammarion's Plate IX is a series of four well-lit photographs of a woman, tulle-

sleeved and seated between two jacketed figures at a small table. Three of the photos are cropped close-ups of everyone's hands, in sequence. First frame: Woman holds Examiner 1's wrist with her right hand, Examiner 2 holds Woman's left. Second frame: Woman's grip on Examiner 1 loosens so her fingers can slide-nudge his hand toward her left, still captive. Third frame: Woman's freed hand hovers over a tender three-way hold; her captive left hand performs double duty—splayed fingers hold Examiner 1's hand in place while her wrist is still gripped by Examiner 2. In this photograph, Examiner 2 thumbs Woman's pinky.

The fourth and final photograph is larger, an accented “ta-da!” that pulls back to show Examiner 1 (a moustached Flammarion), Woman, and the jacketed arm of Examiner 2 (still mostly out of frame). Woman's freed right hand is held up, her fingers positioned part-ways between a pinch and an oratorical gesture of wonder. She smiles placidly but directly into the camera as Flammarion beholds the configuration of hands on the table as if to express, “There: Tricky!” The jacketed arm of Examiner 2 once again grips Woman's wrist tightly. There is no tender thumbing.

Alongside illustrating it so, Flammarion describes Eusapia's surreptitious technique:

The figures shown in Plate IX represent four successive positions of the medium's hands and those of the sitters. They show how, owing to the darkness and to a skilful combined series of movements, she can induce the sitter on the right to believe that he still feels the right hand of the medium on his own, while he really feels her left hand, which is firmly held by the sitter on the left. This right hand of hers, being then free, is able to produce such effects as are within its reach.<sup>6</sup>

Once free, the medium's hand is used to rap, slap, and raise tables, touch other sitters, pluck industrious hairs, waft air through harmonicas, and rattle objects. We are induced.

This substitution is one of many examples of the medium's tricky hands. And Flammarion's images represent a useful

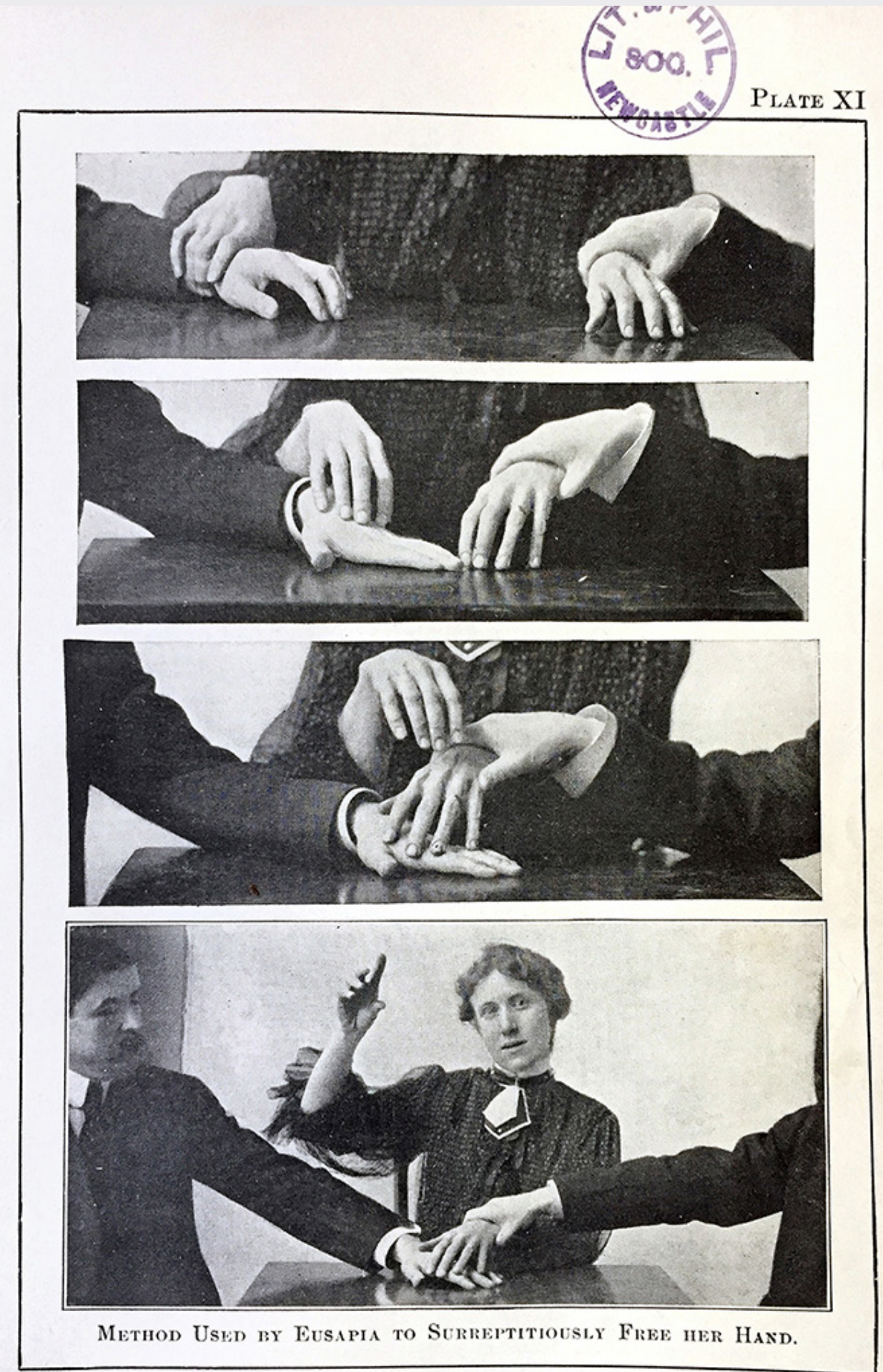


Plate IX in Camille Flammarion, *Mysterious Psychic Forces: An Account of the Author's Investigations in Psychical Research, Together with Those of Other European Savants* (London: Small, Maynard and Co., 1907). COURTESY THE AUTHOR.



if somewhat heavy-handed (apologies) meeting of a number of conflicting viewpoints. Investigator and medium-apparent enact an epistemological and methodological zoetrope. They animate a tense, symbiotic encounter between scientific investigation and more esoteric methodologies. And Flammarion’s entire project is very much forensic in nature: the crisp images perform as crime-scene reconstructions; throughout *Mysterious Psychic Forces* Flammarion documents lights brightening even as Eusapia repeatedly asks for them to be dimmed; he measures, weights, interrogates actions and objects. But Flammarion remains a believer in at least some of Eusapia’s powers. His goal is to investigate, catalogue, recreate, and thereby dismiss psychic fraud. He also dearly seeks to find and endorse what is genuine.

But more trickery! The photographed woman demonstrating the hand substitution is herself a substitution—a forensic/stage assistant. If we are meant to accept this woman as the real Eusapia, other images in Flammarion’s book undermine the substitution. For instance, we’re shown a plaster cast that fills in the concave imprint Eusapia’s face makes in putty (an auratic feat achieved without physical contact). Flammarion compares her miraculous cameo against a striking photograph of the medium in profile, her arms swallowed in heavy fabric and her chest swathed in a dowager’s lace collar. In both images, we see that the real Eusapia is older, delicately jowled and stern. There is no mention of who Flammarion’s younger, hand-modelling “Eusapia” is, or why the need for this particular hoax when the real Eusapia is so gamely prominent elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> This other Eusapia could be Flammarion’s wife, or a fellow psychic enthusiast/skeptic seeking to demonstrate/debunk the practice. Perhaps it is another medium, conceding to reveal a trick of the trade. Trickier still: the third figure in this photo series, seated mostly out of the frame, remains an open question. I’m of the mind that it is a woman in a dress shirt and suit jacket, since all we see is a disjointed arm, a decidedly slim and youthful hand that knows how to tenderly thumb a pinky, and a smudge above the shoulder that could be stray plaited hairs. Regardless, this third figure, like “Eusapia,” is a

functional prop, an assistant, a collaborator, a proxy.

So images meant to demonstrate a dexterous and indiscernible ruse are caught, red-handed (again, sorry), in a bit of a double standard. Something like Edwin Sachs’ popular 1885 *Sleight of Hand—Practical Manual of Legerdemain for Amateurs and Others* may have been on Flammarion’s radar. His photographs effect a similar guidebook quality in their clarity and poise, and the stark white background in the first three images emphasizes a serious and scientific objectivity. But the set-up collapses a bit at the end, in that “ta-da!” moment. The crisp background is a sheet tacked up behind the trio, suddenly too small to fill the larger frame. It reminds me of us all suddenly viewing ourselves anew: on remote video calls to family, friends, and students; tucked into small, personal corners of our homes or positioned strategically against prized, neutral walls; small instances of stuff in the peripheries.

What we’re viewing in Flammarion’s photographs is a forensic restaging of an event that knowingly confounds any investigative capacity. What we’re viewing on our screens is a real-time unfolding of an event that knowingly confounds any investigative or interpretive capacity. A series of staged and unstaged, intentional and unintentional swaps are taking place, all at once: the “seamless” transition of courses online, glasses of wine over Skype, and Netflix Parties to emulate warmth and physical closeness, numerous editorial warnings against texting old flames out of boredom, the effectiveness of Zoom’s hand-raise function to keep everyone from talking over each other in the work meeting. Should we not keep our hands and eyes on the medium?

The veracity of the medium, in all ways, remains a productively open question. In looking at the photographs, it is difficult to imagine that Eusapia’s famous substitution was ever successful in practice. Try it at home with two friends (if you’re lucky enough to have those at hand, at present). Is the sleight of hand convincing? Do you mind that it isn’t? Allow a moment for tender thumbing.

<sup>1</sup> Camille Flammarion, *Mysterious Psychic Forces: An Account of the Author’s Investigations in Psychological Research, Together with Those of Other European Savants* (London: Small, Maynard and Co., 1907), 195. The full quotation reads: “In the experiments which we are considering in these pages, deception is a co-effect which cannot be neglected.”

<sup>2</sup> James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London; Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), 192.

<sup>3</sup> Verse by Pamela Coleman Smith on *A Broad Sheet # 7*, edited by Jack Yeats and published by Elkin Mathews, London, July 1902. From the website of Fonsie Mealy Auctioneers, Lot 443/0297 [SOLD]: “No limitation is recorded, but it is unlikely that more than a few hundred copies of each Broadsheet were produced and coloured. Because of its large size, very few have survived in good condition. ... Extremely rare,” but easily searchable.

<sup>4</sup> Plate IX is inserted between pages 206 and 207 of *Mysterious Psychic Forces*.

<sup>5</sup> Bergson’s passage reads in full: “Even if the most coveted of these becomes realized, it will be necessary to give up the others, and we shall have lost a great deal. The idea of the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality.” In Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1910), 10. Bergson was the brother of artist and occultist Moira Mathers.

<sup>6</sup> Flammarion, 205.

<sup>7</sup> When it comes to images of Eusapia, the most familiar (and infamous) are the photographs in which she’s levitating tables. Someone removed most of them from this particular copy of *Mysterious Psychic Forces*. And why not? They’re stunning to look at: four or five people crowded around a small table, trying to force it down with their hands or springing back in shock as the flash bulb illuminates a visual tangle of hovering feet and table legs. The only levitating photo left in this copy is Plate 4: “Complete Levitation of a Table in Professor Flammarion’s Salon Through Mediumship of Eusapia Paladino.” Eusapia (the real one) sits to the left, her arms taught and her hands extended over the tabletop. I wonder if she ever experienced anything like carpal tunnel syndrome.

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## Virus and Commons

### Andrea Muehlebach

There’s been much talk recently about the necessary work of the commons in the midst of the pandemic, and of the beautiful self-organized mutualisms that societies all over the world have mustered to move through [these dark times](#). It seems that there’s nothing like a virus, moving invisibly through bodies across time and space, to provoke the sudden planetary realization that our bodies are not contained within sovereign skins. Instead, all bodies are radically open and thus vulnerable—pores and orifices through which clouds of droplets and saliva particles swirl with every breath and every movement. And yet, if we have learned anything—anything at all—from this sudden sense of a planetary bodily commons, then it is that the commonality of vulnerability is shot through with brutal inequalities. It’s almost as if there [exist multiple pandemics at once](#): mutually incomprehensible and differently experienced as they tear through communities along the lines of class, race, generation, gender, and (dis)ability.

But even as intense societal differentiation is made manifest in this pandemic, another truth has come to the fore: What counts more than anything at this moment is the need for the [life-making processes](#) that ensure that all are fed, housed, cared for when sick, and educated. These common processes make the life upon which everything, including capitalism, depends—hence the designation of previously undervalued or invisible workers as “essential.” Capitalism hinges on this socially reproductive labour even as it routinely degrades and devalues it. It is fuelled by it even as it refuses to acknowledge its worth. As life stands still under lockdown we bear witness to the fact that capitalism needs this life-making labour to reap profits. There is no wealth but life itself.<sup>1</sup>

But how to translate this event into a durable transformation of how we value life and life-making in common? And how do we avoid that these flourishing common practices and institutions get smothered by or transmuted into their nefarious—nationalist, racist, exclusionary—cousins? We know from Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize-winning work on the commons that commonly held wealth can be cooperatively managed and shared such that it serves the social reproduction of communities over time (Ostrom spoke specifically about finite resources such as arable lands, forests, fresh water, and fisheries—but one might broadly say the same about collective institutions of care and welfare). But these commons also rely on clear group boundaries, on inclusions and exclusions, and thus often also on the tendency to turn inward as a mode of care. The virus has, precisely because of

its planetary nature, already led to the [reassertion of borders](#)—to the enclosure of space and its enforcement via the army and the police. Who is to say that the many authoritarianisms that have already reared their heads in the name of viral emergency won’t use this sudden, desperate need for a commonly held health as an opportunity to entrench the privileges of one’s own while excluding others? I fear that the surge of the common will soon give way to a surge in highly exclusionary (re)investments in nationalist commons, reactionary welfarisms, and care turned inward or against those deemed dispensable.

Yet the virus, like no other event in recent history, makes achingly clear that the health and resilience of all ought to be thought of as a commonly held wealth and that this common wealth must be built and maintained through a primary commitment to society’s most vulnerable members. A society that does not foster this common health (and by this I mean health, broadly conceived, as lives well lived economically, politically, and socially) as a commonwealth is weak and unprepared for [catastrophes to come](#).

<sup>1</sup> John Ruskin, *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the Principles of Political Economy* (London: George Allen, 1906), 156.

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The Migrant Ecologies Project, *Seeding Stories: A Guide to the Interior of a Salt Water Crocodile*, 2019. Crocodile, wheat grain, spirit gleaning ceremony with designer Zachary Chan and researcher Muhammad Faisal Bin Husni, Singapore, May 2019. PHOTO: KEE YA TING. COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND THE SEED CULTURES INITIATIVE.

# Quarantined Connections at the End of the World: The Svalbard Seed Cultures Initiative

Paul Chartrand

At 78.2232 degrees north, deep inside the Arctic Circle, in the Svalbard Archipelago of Norway, lies the town of Longyearbyen. It is a town that has gathered growing significance over the years since the development of one of its most important sites, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. Since opening in early 2008, the Global Seed Vault has accepted more than one million samples of seeds, with a capacity for 4.5 million varieties of crops (2.5 billion seeds in all). The vault's location—120 metres inside a mountain, locked in permafrost—was initially chosen because of the constant -18°C temperature and nearly absent tectonic activity. Despite its seemingly apocalypse-proof site, expensive adjustments have been required to ensure the safety of the vault's seeds through the continued escalation of climate change.<sup>1</sup> It is partly out of this sense of urgency that a new project for preservation was born.

In the same mountain that holds the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, there is a decommissioned coal mine that was once used to store seeds and genetic materials for the future. Within the very same chamber that holds the remnants of that first seed bank, there resides a collaboratively developed vault for preserving culture alongside biodiversity. The *Seed Cultures Initiative* is a project led and curated by

Dr. Fern Wickson, who seeks to build a cultural parallel to the Global Seed Vault with a *Seed Cultures Ark*. The *Seed Cultures Ark* acts as a sort of sister archive to the Global Seed Vault, communicating the cultural connections and stories of the quiet, frozen seeds next door. Over the past two years, the ark has accumulated fifteen artworks from artists and collectives around the world, among whom I had the immense pleasure of being included. A content-rich website functions as an ongoing archive for the project, gathering “exceptional work exploring the life of seeds through art and culture.”<sup>2</sup>

The range of works interred in the mountain is as impressive as the variety of seeds in the neighbouring vault. The contributing artists are all deeply passionate about ecological and social issues concerning seeds and connections with agriculture. Among these concerns are the preservation of heirloom genetic materials, acknowledging Indigenous agricultural techniques, and esoteric spiritual connections with seeds and animism. The conceptual depth and breadth of these artworks form a testament to the importance of the issues considered.

In 2018, the first deposit into the ark included Sara Schneckloth's mixed-media

drawing series *(In)Nascence*, which records the early stages of seed germination as observed by the artist as she nurtured the embryos of beans. The seeds' embryonic potential is captured in these carefully composed images, which channel imaginative and embodied relations with seeds through the visual language of scientific diagrams.

Intricate organic detail and clean geometry combine in the drawings of Mollie Goldstrom. Densely packed imagery reflects scientific, mythic, and literal interpretations and misunderstandings of human/nature relationships regarding seaweed. These drawings reflect the artist's curiosity through her commitment to describing the visual and ecological characteristics of a plethora of seaweed species. Goldstrom's optimism shines through her presentation of the usefulness of seaweed to societies facing environmental devastation.

The branching systems of trees, roots, rivers, and human arteries inform the colourful print-based work of Mary Robinson. Layered, repeating patterns of cellular forms and a blurring of background and foreground reference the formation of memory through lived experience. The artist's prints and books thus become biographical records as well as reflections of biological interdependence.

In 2019, another group of artists was invited to deposit work in the ark. Incredibly detailed microscopic engravings by Sergey Jivetin mark the seed coats of agricultural heritage varieties. The etched drawings symbolically describe the histories of those who cultivated them. The seeds are viewable through custom-made magnifier capsules, and ultimately planted to become living embodiments of their histories.

A photographic and sculptural installation by Ivan Juarez pays homage to La Milpa, a “traditional and historical agricultural system from Maya and Mesoamerica[n] civilization that produces maize, beans, squash, and chile.”<sup>3</sup> Juarez's work harnesses narrative, cultural, historical, and contemporary lived experiences with these staple foods, advocating for dialogue among ecology, art, and society that better represents human connections to food systems. Here, one can see that past ways of living within the natural world remain relevant in the present.

The Migrant Ecologies Project provided a strange chronicle with their contribution, which was based on a specimen from colonial Singapore's Raffles Museum. The artist collective sifted through (gleaned) wheat-straw stuffing from a 4.7-metre-long, 133-year-dead taxidermied saltwater crocodile for a single wheat seed. They documented and presented the process in an installation that respects the spiri-

tual significance of the crocodile, which is believed to host the spirit of Panglima Ah Chong, the Singaporean anti-colonial freedom fighter. Presented partly as a fold-out accordion map/book/guide of the entangled “legacies of colonial agro-economies and monstrous dreams of progress,” the project included many dozens of letters addressed to the “Grain of Wheat/Crocodile/Spirit.”

The contribution from the Seeds In Service duo (Melissa H. Potter and Maggie Puckett) included colourful handmade paper and publications centred on the work of establishing a series of thriving heirloom gardens that serve a variety of feminist causes. The duo's gardening and paper-making practice focuses on issues such as women's reproductive rights and the plants used to control them, and species erased by colonial and racist domination of agriculture. Self-empowerment and collective engagement propel their work forward.

These projects, and many others supported by the *Seed Cultures Initiative*, expose the multitude of crises facing human and plant societies during the Anthropocene. However they also present a hopefulness that art can intervene in contemporary crises through direct social and ecological action. Through community, narrative, and direct action, the participating artists endeavour to challenge the capitalist status quo. Their works acknowledge the impor-

ance of traditional and scientific forms of knowledge, and reject corporate greed—a driving force behind large-scale industrial agriculture.

In Longyearbyen, during 2018 and 2019, some of the artists joined each other to share ideas and work. They exhibited their work at a local establishment for only a single day (measured in hours, not in the setting of a perpetually visible sun). Following the exhibition, the artists packed their work into plastic totes matching those used in the seed vault and headed to the mountain for “burial.” More than 100 metres inside an abandoned coal mine lies the roughly hewn chamber where their art will remain archived permanently. Glistening with ice formed by the breath of the artists, the room also contains the rusting container that originally housed seed deposits from around the world. After a period of silent contemplation, the totes containing the artworks were neatly stacked and left to the cold darkness as the artists returned to the light above.

In light of COVID-19 and restrictions on global travel, no deposit will be made in 2020. Dr. Wickson continues to work on this living project and hopes for another deposit in 2021. It is worth remembering that despite conditions of isolation, artists and environmental knowledge-keepers continue to work collaboratively toward care for the land and each other.



Sara Schneckloth, *(In)Nascence* (detail), 2018. Mixed-media drawing. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE SEED CULTURES INITIATIVE.

1 Damian Carrington, “Arctic stronghold of world's seeds flooded after permafrost melts,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/19/arctic-stronghold-of-worlds-seeds-flooded-after-permafrost-melts>.

2 “Seed Cultures Archive: About,” Seed Cultures Archive, <http://www.seedcultures.com/about>.

3 “Ivan Juarez,” Seed Cultures Archive, <http://www.seedcultures.com/#/ivan-juarez/>.

Paul Chartrand engages with environmental issues through the construction of sculptural life-support apparatuses populated with living plants. He repurposes objects and cultural signifiers like language to act as habitats and conceptual support systems. Doing this subverts and re-contextualizes them as players in functioning ecosystems. Currently he is focused on living text installations, hydroponic assemblages, and interdisciplinary drawing practices. The plants and other natural elements that Chartrand involves all have agency of their own, manifested through their power to change the appearance and effect of the work. Often the projects are dispersed through viewer participation that includes planting, conserving, reading, and physical consumption. By working with plants, it is Chartrand's intention to meaningfully engage with their agency as well as their relationships with humans past, present, and future.







# After the Rains

Sanchari Sur

*We should have started from this: the sky / ... An opening and nothing more / but open wide.* —Wisława Szymborska's "Sky" (translated by Walter Whipple).<sup>1</sup>

The rains were supposed to allay any misgivings that I had, but they didn't. The storm swept across a wide expanse, and I could see the wind making waves of the droplets reflected in the half-daylight. I looked over to my husband, to gesture towards the visions outside our windows, but he shrugged me off pointing to his headset, going back to his meeting about "bugs" in software testing.

It was late in the day, and I had slept in. These days I sleep in just a little bit more, and eat more than I am supposed to, often giving myself a stomach ache. Last night, I gorged on pork belly slices doused in garlic chili oil, licking the oil off of my fingers, careless about my weak digestive system. Sure enough, an hour later, I was racked with cramps and acidity. I also had a sudden onset of a migraine, thanks to the building air pressure, the storm well on its way. As I moaned into sleep, the storm picked up outside, darkening all lights, near and distant.

Now, in the gray morning light, I strain my eyes to see Lake Ontario on the horizon—a shimmering blue band on a clear day—shrouded in mist. I am half reminded of winters in my birth city, Kolkata, where smoke and fog would produce a robust smog blanket to ensconce us in its embrace, hidden from the sky. Here, the sky is visible still, with low dark clouds engulfing us, reminding us we are still in this and in this together.

*I have the sky at my back, at hand, and on my eyelids / The sky wraps me snugly / and lifts me from below.*

My counsellor called me yesterday, keeping our phone appointment. In another time, we would have met in her comfortable office on school campus, in plush chairs facing each other, me talking, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying, mostly revealing my insides without shame. And she would nod, her calm voice soothing reason into my chaotic mind, making me feel safe for that one hour. Later, I would emerge from her office and make another appointment three weeks away, carrying a sort of lightness inside me.

Yesterday when she called, I sat in my bed, in a t-shirt and underwear, my hair in disarray. The day too was deceptively sedate as I looked into the distance, at flickering traffic lights, and one or two cars still on the streets. I couldn't see her, but her voice had the same comfort as her office. I felt like I was in my regular life, that this was regular. After all, we had spoken on the phone once when I had needed an emergency appointment, and I had been okay after. This wasn't very different from that, surely, except now I can't really leave my house, or I am not supposed to anyway. And my husband is in the next room, working like it is a regular working day, unfazed by the current changes. He can't understand why I am unable to compartmentalize like him, and just do what I would do on a Thursday at half past noon. But he commiserated, and cared enough to let me have the bedroom, with the door closed, while I talked too fast, tripping over my words, afraid I was running out of time.

*Even the highest mountains / are no nearer the sky than the deepest valleys.*

The buses are still running; I catch a glimpse of one. The hours will be reduced as of tomorrow, with no fares. People who need to go into work will step out, putting themselves and their families at risk. Many won't have masks to wear; masks more scarce than toilet paper.

My supervisor wrote to me two days ago, reminding me we are privileged to be able to work from home. And yes, I feel lucky, blessed, etc., to have clean running water, working internet, and a roof over my head, with enough food to get us through two weeks, maybe more, if necessary. I am able to order food too, if I choose to, except I must wear a mask and take the elevator to street level, and meet my delivery man outside the entrance of my building. I can see my family too, if I wish, but on video, as if we were in different countries, or continents, instead of a ten minute car ride away.

*There is no more sky in one place / than another.*

My husband thinks I am making a deal out of nothing. No one is going to die if we are careful, and just keep washing our hands and taking the right precautions. No, we are not going to die, but people

we love might. If we are not careful, we could lose our families, without the comfort of a denouement; an unfinished mourning destined to haunt us for as long as we lived. Time moves in fast-forward, a week becomes a decade; a month, a lifetime.

A poet in the writing community lost his grandfather to the virus two days before his 82nd birthday. Later in the day—on the phone, of course—I told my mother about it.

"In Canada?" she exclaimed.

"No, Iran."

"Yes, there it is really bad."

After, I messaged a friend—a fellow academic and an ex-lover—who was in Iran.

"Are you safe?" I wrote.

He didn't reply, but he saw the message. He must be safe, I hoped.

*A cloud is crushed by sky as ruthlessly as a grave.*

Playing Pandemic on my phone is the only thing that seems to calm me. In the game, it is easy to reduce people to statistics, as the virus, bacteria, or fungi, takes over the world, slowly infecting every person ever alive. My strategy is not to be noticed, to silently infect until there is not one single healthy person alive, and then attack. I attack aggressively. Organs fail due to hypoxia. Seizures lead to brain damage, then coma, then death. A cough evolves into pneumonia.

In the end, everyone dies. But I don't win. I never win.

*The sky is omnipresent / even in darkness under the skin.*

The rains have stopped now, the Lake the colour of the sky, a washed out white bed sheet, tinged with a hint of blue. The world is still, not yet devolved into anarchy. In the far distance, the farthest my eyes can go, I can see the faint imprint of the CN Tower, and the cluster of buildings that make up downtown Toronto. Lives are being lived. Everyone and everything is alive, even if it isn't visible.

Previous spread:  
Alison Bremner, *Distancing*, 2020.  
Acrylic on paper. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

Alison Bremner is believed to be the first Tlingit woman to have carved a totem pole. She has studied under master Tsimshian artists David R. Boxley and David A. Boxley. Her work is included in the permanent collections of the Burke Museum, Seattle; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Château Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France; Frye Art Museum, Seattle; and the British Museum, London, among others.

**Crisis and Critique:  
Even if COVID-19 is only the flu, it is still a crisis.  
Even if COVID-19 is the great crisis of modernity,  
it is still nothing special.**

Eric Cazdyn

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, I would often be skeptical about how a certain moralizing tendency insinuates itself into political debate. Take, for example, climate change. Every time someone expresses horror about the willful stupidity of the climate deniers, I find myself more concerned about what might happen if the deniers stopped denying. Wouldn't the deniers opportunistically use the validity of the climate science to justify the most unthinkable of injustices, from new forms of colonialism to genocide? "We had no choice; it was either them or us," they would respond, with their zero sum madness.

Where does such a dark thought experiment leave us? Must we now give up on critique altogether so as to settle for anything short of total annihilation? Not necessarily. The problem today is not with the content of our critique (COVID-19, let alone climate change, is, indeed, an existential threat), but with the very form by which we critique—a lazy, counter-productive habit that mirrors the principles of capitalism and that, ultimately, squeezes dry our deepest political and personal desires.

This same kind of lazy critique was at work when someone based their opposition to the United States-led invasion of Iraq on the fact that they were lied to about the existence of weapons of mass destruction. To moralize against Colin Powell or the *New York Times* is a mistake, and to somehow believe that everything would have gone meaningfully differently if only we would have been told the truth is a fantasy. Critique is never clean. And, sometimes, the truth does not set us free.

The harder position to consider is this: Even if Saddam Hussein did possess weapons of mass destruction, the US still should not have invaded Iraq. Regardless of where we might fall on this position, this "even if, still" logic forces us into the heart of critical thinking and into the limits and possibilities of critique amid COVID-19.

Anyone can argue against the system when it's gone wrong—when a cop's chokehold asphyxiates the innocent man, or when we catch the politician with his pants down. The real test of critical thinking is to resist this temptation to knock on the open door and moralize against the liars and cheats and deniers (however much they deserve it), and, rather, to attune ourselves to how even if the system seems to be functioning crisis-free (everyone acting to the letter of the law), it

is still producing inequality and injustice. Even if the factory is clean and safe, the workers are still being exploited. Even if I am kind and caring, I am still part of the race problem. And, from the other direction, even if the system is producing inequality and injustice (not to mention so many immoral acts by those who live in it), it is still functioning according to plan. This is not some contrarian and easy cynicism; this attunement, rather, requires a rigorous and non-moralizing critique of capitalist logic and an unapologetic speculation about what can come after capitalism.

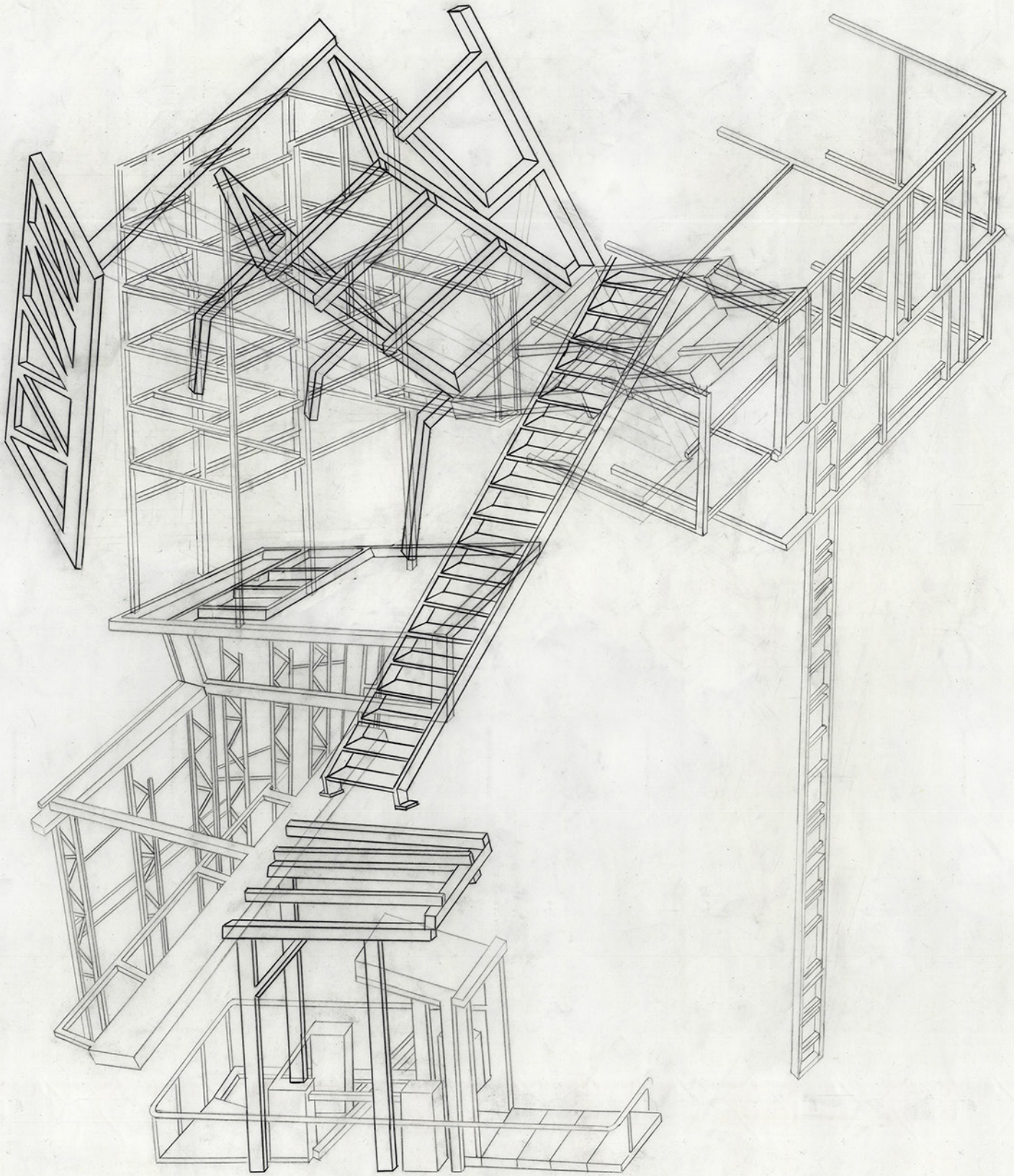
And now comes COVID-19. When Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro reject the medical experts, we are aghast. Likewise, when they accept the science we hold our breath hoping that this does not turn into another eugenics nightmare. The problem today in the midst of the pandemic is that we throw around terms such as crisis and critique without any precision. We know, for example, that there are current political decisions being made whose effects will shape our societies for decades to come. In economics, the left and right struggle over whether the banks, airlines, and other powerful corporations will take unfair advantage of the bailouts. At the same time but under the radar, there is also a discursive struggle being fought in which the very categories of crisis and critique are at stake.

*Even if COVID-19 is only the flu, it is still a crisis. Even if COVID-19 is the great crisis of modernity, it is still nothing special.*

For such perverted claims to make sense we need to rethink what constitutes crisis and critique in the first place. Crisis is not an exception (or virus) that disrupts the smooth operations of a system; rather, it is internal to the system itself (from economics to psychology to biology). Likewise, critique is not a moral judgment about the limitations of a system or its leaders; rather, it is an act that opens up space for another system to come into being.

Eric Cazdyn teaches at the University of Toronto. He volunteered this text in solidarity with *TLLTING* contributors and the Blackwood.





Sara Graham, *Conjecture Diagram no. 03*, 2014. Graphite on mylar. COURTESY THE ARTIST.