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Art as an Act of Social Justice

Introduction to Art, Music, Poetry, in the Time of Social Distance

Christine J. Yeh

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Not too long after the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered our way of life, from how we “go” to work, interact socially, and protect loved ones, the art world also began to shift. Most physical museums had to move their works online and highlight virtual tours to their visitors. Live music venues, now long closed, have had to experiment with outdoor socially distanced performances, drive-in concerts, and inevitable Zoom events. The use of technology as a platform was not limited to video conferencing as social media outlets such as TikTok exploded with dancers, videographers, spoken word performers and painters. Even the covidartmuseum made its debut on Instagram featuring creative works documenting our mask wearing, the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and more recently, vaccine injections. But artists have not only had to grapple with the complexity of how to deliver or share their work, they have also had to consider the relevance and meaningfulness of their subject matter during the pandemic. Or perhaps, we (the audience, listeners, readers, viewers) just engaged with art with heightened awareness and a different perspective. For example, poems and stories about loneliness, isolation, and loss have long existed but now had new significance during this era of social distance. And many would also seek out and find comfort in engaging in music, film, and stories about simpler, happier times. But art is complicated and not easily pigeonholed into oversimplified categories (like uplifting and depressing) and in this Special Issue, our contributors remind of us the important role of art as an act of social justice.

Then, on May 25th, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police. This horrific tragedy, along with countless other murders of unarmed People of Color, fueled protests, demands for policy changes, and a long overdue public awareness of longstanding systemic racism, violence, and white supremacy, and the art world continued to respond. As Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman shared, “*Poetry is always at the pulse of the most dangerous and the most daring questions that a nation, or a world, might face.*” The “twin pandemics”, in fact, underscored how historically targeted and marginalized communities were the most impacted by the pandemic. From overcrowded prisons and homeless encampments, to families separated at the border and unprotected workers, prior injustices became more pronounced, millions lost their jobs or businesses and globally 100 million (to date) have died of the virus with an overrepresentation of People of Color.

In this Special Issue in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship* **Art, Music, Poetry, in the Time of Social Distance**, the contributors grapple with many of these emergent and longstanding inequities with bold reflections and attention to historical discrimination and hate, notions of sanctuary and community, access, racism, and war. Writer and professor Laleh Khadivi in **We Need New Myths** juxtaposes the stillness born from shelter-in-place orders with the constant motion of migrants around the world—seeking asylum, a new life, survival, “*As the highways grew empty and the*

skies clear of planes, I knew the world's migrants were still on the move. They had no choice, stuck in the same limbo they'd been in for months and years. I knew that the virus did not hamper their determined hope and yet my imagination was not with them any longer. I went to a place born of quiet and depth began to think about myths, myths born of a culture's shared nightmares and dreams and sense of themselves."

In **Making Activist Songbook Virtual**, composer and professor Byron Au Yong, discusses the challenges and complexities of moving 53 new activist raps and songs to a virtual format. *"Initially provoked by the racially-motivated murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American beaten to death by two white Detroit auto workers in 1982, Activist Songbook provides a way for human rights organizing and songs to intersect through collective music-making. Central to Activist Songbook is the ongoing legacy of intersectional activism by honoring individuals such as Grace Lee Boggs (1915–2015), a Chinese American revolutionary involved in the Black Power Movement"* As the songbook was participatory in nature, the creative team also had to examine methods of fostering online civic engagement.

In her essay **Art and Internet Infrastructure**, multimedia artist, curator, and professor Liat Berdugo contemplates and complicates our overreliance and relationship with networks and technology especially during shelter-in-place. *"As a media artist, I believe the COVID-19 pandemic has signaled a new urgency around the observing, researching, and gathering of meta-commentaries surrounding our increasingly technologized world and our relationships to our technological objects. For instance, [telecom towers were destroyed across England](#) this past April after people who believed that 5G causes coronavirus set them ablaze. Besides being a conspiracy, what do these kinds of stories indicate about our relationship to technology? Likewise, what do our relationships with -- or ignorance to -- technological infrastructure more broadly signal about our increasingly digital lives?"*

Artist, curator, and professor Sergio De La Torre discusses his work with **The Sanctuary City Project**, which is an ongoing community-based participatory project that develops deeper conversations and awareness about immigration issues oftentimes transforming oral history into visual representations. This project has also led to his book, **When Did You Forget You Were An Immigrant?** As De La Torre shares, *"The inspiration for the book came from the state of undocumented immigrants since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through my research, I have seen undocumented immigrants become "essential workers," working in jobs such as in meat-packing plants, agriculture, and construction that put them at high risk for contracting COVID-19. These undocumented workers have seen no support from the federal government during the pandemic, including no access to the direct monetary payments that most of the U.S. residents received from the stimulus packages passed by congress."*

Writer, poet, and professor Dean Rader in **Three Poems in Search of Justice: A Postmortem**, explores the idea of poetry as a form of justice and shares three original socially-oriented poems as part of a poetic/political project or as he shares "outward"

versus “inward” facing. *“Taking on complex and controversial topics is difficult, but it is also one of the great challenges of being a writer. And, it was with this in mind that I began work on a poem at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. People around the world were dying from this disease at an alarming rate, so it was not something to take lightly or get wrong. But, I felt compelled to try to engage and articulate the anxieties we were feeling (and continue to feel).”*

This unique group of contributors and activists write about the impact of injustice and COVID-19 on their creative works and emergent challenges facing artists, composers, and writers. Providing a cultural and socio-political lens, the essays include images of video, poetry, and art to explore and expose our day to day lived experiences of the pandemic—from notions of isolation, normalcy, community, and distance to the larger impacts this has had on historically targeted groups.

Author’s Note: This Special Issue is part of a multivolume series published by the Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship. The contributors participated in a webinar series sponsored by the Tracy Seeley Center for Teaching Excellence and the Center for Research, Artistic, and Scholarly Excellence, both at the University of San Francisco. The producers of the webinar include Anastasia Vrachnos, Sarah Capitelli, Eugene Kim, Saera Khan, and Christine Yeh.