

Distance and Socially Engaged Projects Now!

Ben Brooker

Back in December 2019, when reports began of an unusual cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, few could have guessed the world was facing an imminent global pandemic. Within months, 'lockdowns' were in place in over a hundred countries, restricting the movement of billions of people worldwide. Of all the industries affected, the arts were among the first, and hardest, to be hit. Venues and festivals were shut down overnight. Countless events were cancelled or postponed. According to the website I Lost My Gig, as of the end of April 2020, \$340 million worth of work had been lost by Australian artists and other related businesses and sole traders.

If the arts in general have been acutely affected by the virus, then participatory and community engaged arts practice in particular have arguably borne the brunt of these affects. With human interaction at the heart of socially engaged performance, both as a methodology and aesthetic, our inability to come together poses unique challenges to artists working in this space. Without being able to gather, we have found ourselves increasingly congregating in online spaces, and using them to make and distribute, in many cases, the fruits of newly digitised art practices. And all this while negotiating the disruption, grief, and anxiety occasioned by a deadly and rapidly spreading global virus.

I spoke to three social practice artists Emma Beech, Rosina Possingham and Kaspar Schmidt Mumm as well as Paul Gazzola, the Artistic Director of Open Space Contemporary Arts, about how 'lockdowns', isolation, and physical distancing have affected their lives and work, and how they are thinking about community engagement at a time of collective separation and trauma.

The first artist I interviewed was Emma Beech, an actor, performance-maker, and 'conversationalist' whose sneezing face has become familiar to South Australians via a recent public health campaign around the flu. One of her first 'lockdown' projects, she tells me, was negotiating with her agent for these ads to be repurposed as coronavirus announcements. Otherwise, she tells me, she has been finding joy in what she calls the 'quiet hours of COVID.' 'The last time I had so much space to think,' Beech says, 'was during impending motherhood.' (She now has three five-year-olds.) Losing one gig after another, she 'got a sense of which had my heart and mind, which of those peripheral jobs I was really connected to and which ones I wasn't. It felt like an opportunity to re-evaluate what held meaning and value in my work as well as my relationships.'

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While scores of people have turned to baking and puzzles to fill their unpressured time, Beech has found herself dipping into long-neglected photograph books and the plays of Chekhov, from which she has been reading aloud. 'I'm working slower and deeper,' Beech tells me. 'I'm taking my time. I've started a new project and there are a lot of people who have a vested interest in it. I'm working less every day: three hours and then I go for a walk.' I put it to Beech that it's as though the 'lockdown' has turned artists – ordinarily overworked and underpaid, hustling for the next gig or contract even before the previous one has finished – into the public's idea of who we were anyway: free spirits following our yearnings in the name of art for art's sake. She agrees. 'It's been good to totally reconnect with what I want to read and be.'

But it has not all been favourable for Beech and her partner, fellow performer Stephen Sheehan. 'There have been times,' Beech says, 'when we fall into bed at night and go, "this is hardcore. How are we going to get through it?" It became about survival.' While Beech says she didn't necessarily grieve for projects cancelled or people unseen, her and Sheehan nevertheless had to deal with their children's sadness and confusion. 'They wanted to know why they couldn't go to the playground,' Beech tells me, 'why they couldn't see their friends. It has put a lot of strain on us. I think we as a family are looking at making significant changes to our lives, thinking about what it is we really need to get by.'

For Rosina Possingham, a multi-disciplinary artist, designer, and photographer, the 'lockdown' provided an opportunity for reflection and reassessment. Prior to the coronavirus, Possingham was working four days a week on a residency at Sauerbier House – the exhibition's opening, on March 24, was a 'flop' as no one turned up – in addition to ongoing client work. Feeling 'swamped and wanting to recover from that', she began to take stock. 'I spent weeks,' she says, 'thinking about alternative ways of doing things for my work, but felt a bit lacklustre without the discipline of going into the studio.' In the end though, Possingham tells me, she found herself with less time than she wished for reading, watching artist talks online, and focusing on her own practice. Instead, she felt she had to pause her own work while she devised new approaches to thinking, working, and running workshops for Northern Sound System, the City of Onkaparinga, and Carclew's Pom Pom.

'I get a lot of energy,' Possingham explains, 'from opening up my projects early. I didn't really realise this. And in terms of the workshops, I've found that I learn at the same time as teaching. But Zoom is nowhere near as good as face-to-face. We've been getting half the number of participants and it's hard to get in the mood when all of our routines have been so disrupted.' Possingham is hoping an Australia Council grant will enable her to run more quick response workshops in Adobe Draw and Fresco. In the

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meantime, the Park Lands Project is keeping her occupied, albeit unhurriedly: 'It's been a really slow process because we're working out new models of community engagement, which is a really important part of the project. And it's frustrating not knowing if we'll be able to go ahead with the final exhibition, currently scheduled for November 22 this year'. (Editor's note: This project was subsequently postponed to 2021)

This uncertainty has spared few artists with performative practices. Kaspar Schmidt Mumm, whose work combines elements of protest, community gathering, and ceremony, was meant to be performing at Whyalla's uneARTh Festival in March but it was also postponed. He tells me:

I've been paid the money, with the hopeful plan that it will happen later in the year. Other gigs have been straight up cancelled. It's like this new theme, or circumstance in society, that everyone can react to. The more things you can grab intuitively that are right in front of you the more you can have these conversations. Artists are needed now more than ever to have discussions that need to be had. If I'm given parameters to work with, I usually work better. Too many options isn't good for me! I've been focussing on writing and painting in my studio. Society thinks of me as this person who puts on events but now, I have an excuse not to do that!

For Schmidt Mumm, the conversations artists should be having now extend beyond the coronavirus and its consequences. He hopes the situation opens our eyes to environmental collapse and the plight of refugees around the world, which are going to be with us for a lot longer than the pandemic. We must, he feels, look unflinchingly at the colonialist and white supremacist history of Australia, and fully reckon with the ways the Black Lives Matter protest movement is 'revolutionising the world right now.' And while, by necessity, most of these conversations are happening online, Schmidt Mumm believes it's important we remain alert to the classism inherent in digital spaces, and the generational fault-lines that COVID-19 has exposed in their use. 'Our access to these conversations,' he says, 'shouldn't be limited by our ability to buy a good computer, webcam, or WiFi.'

While the merits of digital performance remain hotly contested – Schmidt Mumm, Possingham, and Beech are, so far, somewhat sceptical – I wonder if the pandemic will at least sharpen our sense of who gets to make art, and who for. The most successful online work I'm aware of is that which acknowledges the presence of an audience, somewhere out there, and our active, even symbiotic, relationship to the art we engage with. As Schmidt Mumm tells me:

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Whether you're a highly trained artist making really expensive work for clients that are millionaires or billionaires or you're a social worker who makes paintings with kids in a community centre your roles are going to be so different in how you view what the arts can and should do. Plain and simple, I want to make events where there are people of different backgrounds working together to create Australian culture. Sometimes I get paid to do that but from the beginning it's been more about conversations about Australia and what it means, and involving people who aren't necessarily artists. I don't care what it is I make just as long as I get to have those conversations and build Australia's culture.

For Paul Gazzola and OSCA, the coronavirus and physical distancing have similarly ushered in a period of reflection and, perhaps, renewal. As a company focussed on creating participatory art-based projects, OSCA has had to contend with the postponement of three festival engagements but, Gazzola says, this has led to a fruitful reconsideration of how it develops work that emphasises access, inclusion, and diversity. He tells me via email:

OSCA has remained positive in the current time by using it as a chance to reflect on how we go about things even though it hasn't been simple to negotiate at times. This period, while still remaining an incredibly busy time, has temporarily taken the pressure off our artistic model of continuous production. This has been significantly beneficial and will remain so well into the future. By delaying the outcome of a number of our major works in 2020, we have been given an opportunity to ask more questions and plan in more detail how we go about their final presentation. It has challenged us to think about who we make work with and for. It has also brought up many questions about who is represented in our works and how we go about making the connections to afford greater representation within the broader SA community.

All of this has not, however, been without a sense of loss. Gazzola says he misses being able to develop site-based public engagement processes with artists, as well as observing the connections made when people interact with participatory artwork. While Gazzola sees the technology-based creation and dissemination of work as fertile ground for experimentation – OSCA has been making short video documentaries of its projects since 2016, and in August of this year premiered its first video commission, *Gardens Don't Lie* by Mona Khizam – he is adamant that 'the experience of art through physical connection and interaction in a location can never be replaced.'

Each of the artists I spoke to for this essay acknowledged that Australia has so far been relatively unscathed by the pandemic. No doubt the Government will claim credit

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for this – and some will most likely be merited, mainly for its sensible economic response – but our success in avoiding the fate of other nations, like so many of our advantages, is more than anything a matter of luck. It's not by good political judgement but rather by dint of being an island, and geographically remote from the rest of the world, that we have escaped the worst. Nevertheless, while global case numbers continue to rise and ongoing outbreaks continue in all states, it's too early to say what social, political, and economic scars will linger from this time. 'I think people will remain wary for a long period,' Gazzola tells me, 'but the human race has a tendency to forget very easily.'

Ben Brooker is an Adelaide-based writer, editor, critic, essayist, bookseller, and playwright. His work has been featured by *Overland*, *Australian Book Review*, *RealTime*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Daily Review*, *Verity La*, *Witness*, *ArtsHub*, and others. In 2016-17 Ben was an inaugural Sydney Review of Books Emerging Critics Fellow and in 2018-19 was writer-in-residence at The Mill.

This essay is the first in a new strategy for OSCA focused on engaging local writers interested in writing about participatory and socially engaged art practices that take place solely in the public domain.