

# MINE THE GAP. FINE ARTS IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIC

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The necessary condition for the reception of art is aesthetic distance, which paradoxically relies on direct experience: one has to be there in front of the artwork, has to live the experience. Therefore, the current pandemic and the practice of social distancing, which attempts to slow it down, is a serious challenge for the arts. This text analyses the ways in which artists and the institutions which mediate art react to the conditions caused by the pandemic. I will present some creative practices which turn the adversity of the pandemic into an asset [the White Cuib Facebook project and the series by Sán-

dor Bartha]. So, there are projects which mine the gap [social distancing] and use it creatively. Then I will analyze the practice of some museums and galleries, focusing on the positive examples [e.g., the "Stay at Home Museum"] as well as on the difficulties. The examined cases will reveal the fact that while the artists were able to react in creative ways to the constraints and to create artworks which point beyond the contextual value, art institutions generally attempted merely to get through this period, hoping that they would soon be able to get back to life as usual.

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## 1. Aesthetic Distance and Social Distancing

One of the themes of aesthetic discourse which has preoccupied specialists since the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the issue of “aesthetic distance.” The tone for the discussion was set by the 1912 Edward Bullough study, which discussed distancing and the consciousness of distance as a necessary element of aesthetic experience. It is this distancing that enables us to differentiate between reality and art, respectively, to apply to the various phenomena of life not the criteria of utility and morality, but those of aesthetics. The theoretical foundation of aesthetic distance can be found in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.

It seems that aesthetic experience, and the experience of art, even more, has a property that could be termed as “disinterestedness” [Kant, 2000]. According to Kant, the enjoyment of beauty is disinterested and not associated either with the interest of reason or predispositions; its enjoyment is not associated with any selfish point of view. Hence, later writings, especially of the analytic tradition, pose the question of the aesthetic experience, which is necessary to experience a phenomenon as art. The essence of this attitude is aesthetic distance: a kind of psychological distancing from the contemplated experience. In order to react aesthetically to it, we must not fully immerse ourselves empathically into the death of Desdemona and cannot view it as something real. Aesthetic distance is the consciousness of the fact that we are not dealing with life but art, and thus we have to react to the experienced phenomena not with action but with contemplation. In a thorough study, P. A. Michelis [1959] discusses the various meanings of aesthetic distance, including its spatial, temporal, and psychological aspects, concluding that “[i]n aesthetic contemplation, the spectator is called on to obtain a distance of spiritual dimensions, where space and time become an ideal space-time” [11]. The issue is more complex in the case of the creating artist, since “[t]he artist must be at the same time close to and removed from his experience; both detached spectator and passionate performer, unimpassioned participant of passion, a disinterested but absorbed contemplator, conceiving yet also judging his work” [Michelis, 1959: 12]. Although George Dickie [1964] has tried to demonstrate that the aesthetic attitude is a harmful myth, it is undeniable that aesthetic distance as the awareness of the difference between art and life remains an integral part of the experience of art.

Why is, then, the issue of aesthetic distance raised in the first place? The answer lies in the fact that, at a superficial glance, artworks and everyday objects, the phenomena of art and the ordinary phenomena of life present themselves to us in the same manner. At the level of the senses, there is no difference between viewing a painting or a bucket of water, between watching a theatre play or our neighbours' fight. At the level of sensory experience, real objects or events stand before us in the same way as the artworks.

This "standing before us" should be understood literally, and its importance must be recognized. Artworks have to be experienced, as it is not enough to just read or to listen to accounts about them. It is not sufficient only to obtain information about a novel, a theatrical play, or a painting – one has to be there to see it, hear it, experience it. It is a basic premise of aesthetics that nothing can substitute direct experience. This is why we travel to Paris and pay the not inconsiderable admission fee to the Orangerie, because it is something entirely different to see Monet's water lilies live than on a screen or in a printed book.

Many of my acquaintances have often complained that due to cultural tourism, they had to buy the tickets to the larger exhibitions and the more famous museums months in advance, had to stand in line for hours, and could not really see the paintings because of the large crowd. As for myself, I could not but welcome this revived interest for theatre, film, music, and the fine arts, which presented itself in the increased attendance of festivals, concerts, and museums, in the boom of cultural tourism. Many people wanted to directly meet art, and for this, they had to travel to it, to be where the painting was, where the installation, the concert, the theatrical performance took place. Aesthetic distance also means that we are there, in direct contact with the artwork, and are aware that what we are seeing and hearing is not everyday reality, but art. However, all this happens only if we are really there. Aesthetic distance is, at the same time, also a kind of presence.

It is for this very reason that the pandemic represents a completely new situation for art, as the method to limit the spread of the virus consists of social distancing. The prescribed distance of 2/1.5 meters, which should reduce the danger of infection, has made it impossible to hold any mass gatherings during the period of the pandemic. At the same time, most governments have temporarily suspended all activities considered as not absolutely essential [food supply and the health sector remained priority areas, receiving further subsidies, and rightly so], while all the rest was moved online [e.g. education]. The arts, as we have

seen before, are mass gatherings, on the one hand [a concert, a theatrical performance or a more prestigious museum exhibition are doubtlessly mass events], and they are not absolutely necessary for mere survival, on the other hand. Due to the cessation of international traffic, events with large, international audiences had to be cancelled, one after the other, and the smaller institutions have also lost their incomes. Because a large portion of the artists lacks a steady income, making their livelihood from events, tenders and the selling of their artworks, the minimally two-month quarantine created a financially difficult situation for many of them. At the same time, it also meant forced inactivity, which was difficult to endure for the artists who could not meet their public. The institutions and participants of the art world have found themselves in a new, dystopic world from one day to the next.

## **2. Mine the Gap**

The situation is/was especially difficult for the fine arts, for which the direct encounter with the artworks, the sensory experience of the artwork, is an essential requirement. Here, I would like to present some initiatives which attempted not to jump over the gap between our normal lives and the special state of the quarantine, or over the social distancing between us, but to exploit it as a possibility.

### *a. White Cuib Project, Dan Perjovschi*

The White Cuib is a gallery from Cluj, with the posters for some of the 2016 exhibitions on the gallery website. The last pictures were taken on a real exhibition, on 11 March 2020. The introductory text of the gallery's Facebook page, dating from 2012, states: "We're a group of friends with a passion for the arts, providing a blank space for whatever matters. In downtown Cluj, Romania" [White Cuib, n.d.]

Dan Perjovschi's exhibition should have opened in the White Cuib on 9 April 2020. Meanwhile, a state of emergency was declared in Romania, museums and galleries were closed, and the planned exhibition had to be reconsidered. The artist reacted thus:

I am adaptable. I don't have any colors, I draw with the pencil. If I don't have a pencil, I can draw with my finger. I don't have a pencil either? I'll wet my finger with some saliva and draw like that... Is my mouth dry? I'll draw in my head. Is the gallery closed? I'll exhibit my works on the windows. I have learned all my life from lacks and mistakes. All I've done as an artist

is to sneak beside and under barriers. I have managed to transform disadvantages into advantages. [...] Now there's the Virus and we've barricaded ourselves in our homes. The empty shelves, the closed borders and the lack of toilet paper are all too familiar for me. I've been here before. The only thing is that now we have freedom of expression. [White Cuib, 2020, p. 23.03.2020]

Thus, the planned exhibition has changed and Perjovschi started a "Virus Journal" on the Facebook page and the Instagram profile of the White Cuib, which subsequently turned into a joint project. Starting with 6 April, the journal functions with four main artists [Dan Perjovschi, Ana Kun, Alina Andrei, George Rosu] and many guests invited from all corners of the world. The project's title was enriched with new connotations: the gallery's name already hinted at the sterile exhibition space of modernist art [White Cube]. Now, the "Cuib" [Nest] also associates the current quarantine situation, in which everyone is enclosed in their "nests," holed up in their homes. The goal of the project is to collect and present to the public the creative reactions and responses of the artists. It is a collaborative project, with many and very diverse participants. During the first week, about seven images were posted daily, but subsequently, the gallery was sometimes enriched, on average, with even 32 new pieces every day. The guests included Brent Birnbaum [New York], Aldo Giannotti [Vienna], David Böhm & Jiří Franta [Prague], Caterina Preda, [Smithville, Texas], Trevor Yeung [Hong Kong], Mischa Kuball [Düsseldorf], Rie Kawakami [Tokyo], Gluklya Pershina [Sant Petersburg], Patrick Roussel [Caen, France], Raimar Stange [Berlin], Quentin Jouret [Toulouse], Hans D. Christ [Stuttgart], Luchezar Boyadijev [Sofia, Bulgaria] Eirini Linardaki & Vincent Parisot [Heraklion, Greece], Daniel Garcia Andujar [Barcelona], Roberto Uribe Castro [Bogota], Raphaël Larre [Toulouse, France], Nedko Solakov [Sofia, Bulgaria], Beagles&Ramsay [Lewisham, United Kingdom]. The majority of the guests invited there were Facebook contacts of Dan Perjovschi. It seems that the organizers of the project are continuously present not only as artists but also as curators, observing the artworks of their colleagues and including the artwork which is thematically and contextually suitable for the virus journal. On the whole, the project ran nine weeks. The sheer quantity of the uploaded pieces is impressive: 1108 images.

It was an admirable project, with fascinating reactions from artists to a situation which – beyond the general fears and inconveniences

– pushes them into uncertainty, shaking the foundations of the institutional system which helps them to survive.

In the following section, I will present one of the projects of the White Cuib, which wittily reacted to the confinement brought by the quarantine.

*b. Sándor Bartha*

Sándor Bartha [1962-] currently lives in Budapest and is a teacher at Partium Christian University from Oradea. He combines various media in his work [drawing, painting, installations, photographs, animations, videos, etc.]. The curfew caught him in his home in Budapest and, from the window of his home, he created a series that reacts to social distancing. His works humorously deconstruct the boundaries between outside and inside, overturn the perspective and the spatial proportions, in fact making it possible for us to experience physical and social space from a completely new perspective. He created photographs for which he used the contingent events going on outside, on the street, and also the instruments from his own space [his finger, a paper house, a magnifying glass, prepared fine art reproductions, etc.]. The English titles also represent a very important part of the artworks.

The first series of images was published on Facebook on 22 April, under the title *I can touch everybody from my quarantine*. The artist photographed the passers-by from his balcony as he touches them with his seemingly giant fingers. The focus is on the passers-by, and the touch is sometimes tender and sometimes menacing. The photographs do not attempt formal perfection: the finger sometimes covers the heads of the passers-by or merely shows a thin strip of them. These works humorously “heal” one of the characteristics of social distancing which is most difficult to tolerate: the prohibition of bodily contact. The photographs show hidden encounters, the touching of strangers, which is strictly prohibited in reality, and they do so in a way that remains a secret for the other party. Sándor Bartha’s humorous and thought-provoking photographs present a constructed situation of the encounter between reality and art. The series continued on 23 April with more photos, more gestures, pointing, and carrying the subjects of the photographs on his palms. On the same day, another series was published, titled *Trying to isolate some of them...*, which alludes to one of the forms of social distancing, voluntary or enforced isolation. For these works, the artist used the plastic cover of a yogurt box, which encloses the passers-by into a circle, while also creating a grid structure lock-

ing them into a cage. One of the photos, enclosing into the imaginary cage a worker doing his job on the lawn, is especially interesting. The worker's efforts become completely futile, he practically cannot even lift his rake, as he bumps into the walls of the cage. The artist plays with his miniature and unknowing subjects, depriving them of their freedom, as an impish and invisible god. On 4 April, the childish play of the impish god continues with the series titled *...or catch them...*, as if the artist tried to catch the passers-by into a glass jar, just as the precious pieces of an insect collection. Sometimes the focus is on the glass trap, and sometimes on the people who unknowingly walk into the traps. The way in which the artist uses the handrails of his balcony reminds the viewer of a puppet theatre: one can almost hear the screams of the kindergarteners: "Look out! Trap!", and the game is even crueller when the artist is preparing to cover a runner with a purple plastic hemisphere, permanently stopping his vigorous movement. The title of the picture [*Trying to escape*] hints at the fact that the game has not been decided yet – the subject tries to escape, he is in pretty good shape, has had a good sprint, and he may succeed.

On 27 April, the artist presented a short video, titled *Summer House on my Window Sill*, in which the small cardboard house placed on his ledge and the man who unloads his parked car in the street become part of the same space. It seems as if the man would have arrived with his family (there are two more people next to the car) at this summer home for a long-awaited vacation. The photographed man is enjoying the happiness that is now forbidden to everyone – but he is unaware of it. On the photograph from 28 April [*Trap*], the man walking his dog has another trap prepared for him: a giant cube, which is now balancing at a corner with its mouse-catching mechanism, yet we can foresee that it will close down upon the individual who is walking his dog otherwise legally. On 29 April, the artist succeeded in collecting three bicycle riders in his jar [*Collecting*], and the comments also reveal that he will let them go after testing, so there should be no worries that his receiving capacity will be exhausted. In order to make the process even clearer, he places a mechanism on his ledge on 30 April, with the inscription "Testing Lab," in which the test subject is walking into. On 1 May, there is another video [*Warning and Stopping*]: a Lego figure signaling to the passers-by that he should stop, and since he does not comply, but tries to move on, he bounces back from the sole of the Lego figure's foot. It is a quite funny, looped little video, with some of the charm of Charlie Chaplin scenes, as if we witnessed

the eternal struggle between the restrictive state authorities and the citizens trying to test the limits of their freedom. It seems as if we cannot help but root for the citizen who does not learn from his mistake and let go of his attempt to move freely. In the series titled *Protecting them by changing their context*, the artist highlights the passers-by and places them into a more acceptable context, such as the La Grande Jatte island, by cutting out Georges Seurat's picture, among the crowd spending their sunny afternoon there. He frees them from their confinement caused by the pandemic, so they can happily mingle with the relaxing crowd, while also protecting them from the risk of infection. This is the last piece of the series, with an optimistic overtone, compared to the possibilities of the present, with the image of the past and the hoped-for future.

The majority of the images show the government poster, stating "Curfew extended" with letters using Hungary's national colors. As long as there is a curfew, ingenuity of art is a way out of anxiety, worry, and emptiness. This project, whose context and the theme is the pandemic, with its means also offered by its restrictions and possibilities, is one of the wittiest artistic responses I have encountered during this period.

### ***3. The Show Must Go On[-line]***

While the artists, as shown by the above examples, can also work from their home, in quarantine, the institutions which mediate art have a much harder time. Museums, galleries, and auction houses have built on the essential necessity of immediate experience, which was made impossible by the sudden social distancing which has come upon us. Exhibitions and art fairs were suddenly cancelled, and museums were closed for at least two months. Many of the numerous art institutions have come into an insecure position, and museums terminated the contract of the staff whose work was directly related to visitors, including museum educators.

In spite of the more than unfriendly circumstances, many institutions have chosen, instead of waiting for the end of the quarantine and to hope for the return of the normal circumstances, to keep in touch with the artists and the public. The most characteristic practices and phenomena of the age of the pandemic:



### 3. 1. *The museums have moved to the world wide web – Google’s “Arts and Culture” project*

Perhaps one of the biggest winners of the pandemic was Google’s “Arts and Culture” project, dating from 2011, which virtually enabled an experience at distance, quite close to direct experience. The project consists of an online platform, which enables viewers through high-resolution images and videos to get acquainted with works of art and cultural artifacts offered by the project’s partner institutions from all over the world.

On the one hand, the Google project offers the possibility to “visit” the museums with the help of Google Street View, to see the rooms and the physical context of the works of art. On the other hand, through Picasa technology, we may view the images in a resolution that is higher than what the naked eye could offer. These are the main functions, to which Google has added some popular ideas, e.g., the “Art Selfie” or the “Create an Artwork Collection.”

Currently, the platform offers access to 2500 museums and galleries, with more than 45.000 art objects [Martinique, 2020]. Most of the museums have not only built in the Google Street View but have also published “stories,” generally presenting some of the artworks in detail. The story may proceed horizontally or vertically, with the images presenting an enlarged view of the story’s current moment. Some museums are present with only one story, while others have more than ten. The Musée d’Orsay, for instance, has published only one story, about the building and the way in which it was transformed from a train station into a museum. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, on the other hand, has 26 stories, The National Gallery of London has 12, and the Rijksmuseum 11 [*Google Arts & Culture*, n.d.]. These stories were probably already published on the platform, but now, due to the pandemic, many more people have visited these websites.

### 3. 2. *Virtual exhibitions*

The galleries which did not want to close down have followed two strategies. One was the virtual gallery, while the other offered the possibility to view the exhibition from the window.

In a virtual gallery, the visitor may walk around the real space virtually, stopping before some of the artworks, which may be approached with varying degrees of success. As for myself, this strategy was quite

a disappointment, and I found the materials uploaded in pdf files more comfortable and instructive; these files offered photographs of the artworks, accompanied by curatorial texts. One of my main dissatisfactions with some of the virtual galleries was that they did not, or hardly explained which artwork we are viewing; the artworks were difficult to approach, and basic information was sometimes missing. My feeling was that this kind of approach was more appropriate for the generations socialized in the world of video games, in addition to the usual, static informational material, centred on texts and images.

The exhibition which can be viewed from the window may be used in cases where the gallery has a larger surface facing the street front. This, of course, is also a forced solution since, in many cases, not only did the galleries have to close but also the potential visitors, heeding the call to “stay home,” or due to the movement restrictions, did not probably consider visiting of exhibitions a necessity in the most severe months of the pandemic.

### *3. 3. Virtual events: exhibition openings, conversations, talks*

One of the online events consisted of live online exhibition openings, with no one else present in the real space than the gallery owner, the person reciting the opening text, and a few technicians. The opening text could be heard in real-time, and the exhibited works could be viewed online. The Kieselbach Gallery from Budapest has opened on 29 April 2020 the „CONTEMPORARIES QUARANTINED - SHOP WINDOW EXHIBITION” with talks from the gallery owner and Krisztián Nyári. The opening ceremony was transmitted live via Facebook, then the edited material was published on their website [*Contemporaries Quarantined - Shop Window Exhibition, 2020*] and also on YouTube. The charming clumsiness of these new attempts could also be witnessed during the opening: Krisztián Nyári’s microphone was muted for a while, so nothing could be heard, and the video recording made with a mobile phone could hardly be considered top quality, so the entire opening had a home-made feeling, characteristic of new attempts and experiments. It is quite difficult to talk to an audience without an actual audience, so we could witness the difficulties of adapting to the new situation of even these “professional players.” The opening also included short videos made by the exhibiting artists of themselves, also at home, with more or less success, without a unified concept, some of them in a tense state, and others didactically, trying to substitute the direct ex-

perience of the images with the visual transmission, confessions, and video messages.

The online sales of the auction houses were also a novelty. It seemed that purchases went on, but this form of art dealership was definitely more favorable to already-known artists, further widening the economic and social divide already characteristic for the art world.

On a positive note, new groupings of the participants have emerged. After the Viennese galleries have organized the “Not Closed” online event, several eastern and southern European galleries have joined forces on a common platform for a one-week project, including virtual interviews, artist talks, studio visits, and a digital exhibition. The “Not Cancelled East x South” joint project presented one artist from each of 17 galleries (*Not Cancelled*, 2020). Isabella Ritter and Katharina Schendl, co-owners of LambdaLambdaLambda viewed the pandemic as a possibility: “Maybe this ‘crisis’ will create some new opportunities and break up the hegemonomies that weren’t really productive anymore.” [*Art Fairs Used to Be Their Portal to the World. Now Galleries in Serbia, Romania, and Other Southeastern European Countries Are Uniting Online*, 2020].

One of the most interesting solutions was presented by the museums of Flemish cities, with the project titled the “Stay at Home Museum,” with five professionals presenting one of the masterpieces of five museums in five episodes. These half-hour footages were uploaded to YouTube, so everyone had the chance to admire them. Van Eyck expert Till-Holger Borchert, Director of Musea Bruges, presented the Ghent Altarpiece, the work of the Van Eyck brothers. The video was uploaded on 8 April, and watched by almost 700.000 people during a month and a half. The director of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts from Bruxelles, Michel Draguet, presented one of the paintings of Brueghel. The video was uploaded on 15 April and has 400.000 viewers in one month. Another episode followed on 22 April, in which Ben Van Beneden, the director of the Rubens House led us to the Rubens “art gallery room,” reaching almost 400.000 viewers in one month as well. The video uploaded on 29 April, in which the curator of the Mu.ZEE from Ostend, Mieke Mels talks about one of the paintings of James Ensor, had more than 300.000 viewers during three weeks, and the video of the museum guide Annik Vlemickx, presenting the Hof van Busleyden castle from Mechelen, reached 200.000 viewers in two weeks. I think this is a great initiative, and the number of viewers of these videos would have probably lagged much behind the current numbers if the conditions would have been “normal.” The video of the Royal Academy of Art from London, titled Ex-

*hibition on Screen: David Hockney RA*, uploaded to YouTube on 19 April 2020, has reached 150.000 viewers in one month, while their former videos were watched by much fewer people [a video dating from 2016, *In the studio with David Hockney RA*, had 83.000 viewers, and an interview with Anselm Kiefer has reached 40.000 people]. It seems to me that these expertly made videos in which the museum representatives present some precious artworks, offer a great opportunity for the museums in terms of communication with the public, setting up a genre that could be set forth irrespective of the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

The experience of art is characterized by directness, being there in the nearness of artwork – thus, the quarantine situation and social distancing presented a great challenge for fine arts. The analysis of the responses to the pandemic from the art world revealed the following:

1. The unusual situations often presented a motivational factor for artists: the restrictions, constraints, and limits have often become instruments for them in coming up with creative responses. Sándor Bartha's project, presented above, has managed to turn the situation of the pandemic and social distancing into an asset, in the framework of a coherent and witty project, in which social distancing is a topic and an instrument at the same time, with witty and humane artworks for coping with an inhumane situation. The White Cuib project, with its approximately one thousand artworks, also supports the hypothesis that artistic freedom and creativity may [also] flourish in times of crisis.

2. The reaction of art-mediating institutions was somewhat more difficult: deprived of their income, most museums reacted with the dismissal of their staff. I have found little data pointing to the fact that museums would have started to produce more online material. The "Stay at Home Museum" initiative of the Flemish museums was a refreshing exception from this perspective. Galleries and auction houses have suffered great losses. The attempts of galleries show that the virtual exhibition opening and the window-exhibition are not more than forced solutions, which did not give rise to ideas that could be carried further in an effective manner. Auction houses have attempted virtual auctions, with limited success. At the end of May, Sotheby's has held an auction that could be termed as "final sales," with the pieces of former auctions offered again at a fraction of their initial cost [Emód, 2020]. It seems that art institutions were less successful in adapting to the new

circumstances, and attempted to somehow live through this period, waiting for the return of the old, “normal” world.

In the following few years we will find out if this expectation was fulfilled, and we will return to the former practices, or we are witnessing the beginning of something entirely new within the art world.

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