

COVID E-LIT: Digital Art from the Pandemic, ELO2021



curatorial statement

Starting the preparatory phase of our research project almost one year ago, we were primarily interested in capturing the cultural moment of the then-nascent COVID pandemic through the lens of digital culture in general and electronic literature and digital art in particular. In the course of barely a couple of months in 2020, we witnessed the massive shift of transferring almost every aspect of our everyday life online. This quickly resulted both in an explosion of new forms of creativity and the acute syndrome of much-touted “Zoom fatigue”. The former were often mediated through popular platforms and brought new digital genres (such as Tik-Tok duets and the homemade reenactments of classic paintings), on top of already recognized but still under researched variants of meme culture or sometimes troubling discourse of subreddits. Although with the COVID-19 crisis digital networked platforms took center stage and corporations like Facebook, Google, Apple and Zoom still form the main interfaces to our public space, soon it became obvious that the digital culture of the pandemic coincides with surprising and disturbing developments, such as the noticeable move of far-right extremism towards the open-source, niche, and independent platforms such as PeerTube, Pleroma, MeWe, Zello, or infamous Parler. Another visible feature of the massive online shift related to what Naomi Klein has named “Screen New Deal”, where commercial technology platforms are introduced to a much larger extent and integrated with our private spaces and homes, is the development of new forms of critical reflection, e.g. about how platforms invade privacy, intimacy, individual spaces and simultaneously collaboration, communities, cultural and political life. Such a

reflection often takes the form of digital artwork, available for download and functioning as the browser plug-in or add-on.

Yet, it seems the pandemic not only created a distinctive crisis of its own, but also exacerbated the ones that have long been in the making. Underfunded and inefficient public healthcare and education systems were the first to undergo the shock of sudden failure. In light of the famous Stafford Beer's observation known as POSIWID (the purpose of the system is what it does), such failures became particularly illuminating and sobering to many who were prone to believe that the rich countries of the global North can maintain their global dominance and endless development at the expense of the environment and colonized "others", including those suffering along the lines of various oppressive ideologies and systems of domination: racial, gender, class, ideological, and economic. Achille Mbembe in his illuminating essay "The Universal Right to Breathe"¹ aptly remarks: "Before this virus, humanity was already threatened with suffocation" and warns that following the hitherto path will bring further destruction on an already unprecedented scale, where the economy of extraction based on and favoring fossil fuels is inevitably interlinked with our super-efficient and energy-hungry digital world. This is why we were also interested in how the pandemic digital art and e-literature tackled the wider crises of our contemporaneity: climate change, racial injustice, gender inequality and social inequality. Many works developed during this time are then reflective of public clashes and rebellion, e.g. in relation to Black Lives Matter, during a period in which dominant power structures are exposed and actively questioned. Furthermore, there are many works mourning the deceased, the sick, as well as the loss of human connections that were not long ago taken for granted.

On the other hand, since the outbreak of the pandemic, public libraries, theatres, museums, and cultural festivals have been closed to various degrees across many countries and much cultural life and many creative practices have moved online, along with their audiences. This alone posed significant challenges to the whole cultural sector, but was also seen as a chance to find new ways of communicating and new solutions to make cultural life more accessible to the various types of audiences. It seems, in the pandemic we have been collectively mourning

A. ¹Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe", trans. C. Shred, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/>

the lost space of shared human presence and want to believe this loss is only temporary. This hope is being reflected in many artworks in the exhibition that confine with the near space, locality, nature, various constraints impacting embodiment practices, the home and homely. It has also manifested as a uniting thread running through the interviews we have conducted with many of the artists in the exhibition as an attempt at documenting our encounter with the artists and their work - embodied feelings and the treasured shared presence of our human body/minds around was discussed by each and every artist we talked to over Zoom in March 2021, working on a forthcoming documentary skillfully produced and videographed by Ashleigh Steele.

For many pandemic crisis has been experienced as both an intense, extended period relieved from FOMO, and as sheer boredom and utter restlessness. Most of us have experienced the intrusion of platforms like video conferencing into our very living rooms and bedrooms, which has led to the emergence of critical awareness but also to a way of getting used to being together across screens. In this sense, old distinctions between online and offline, the virtual and the physical and perhaps even art and reality have somewhat diffused themselves into new hybrids. And digital artists and elit authors reflect on analogue matters like bodies, homes, concrete environments and physical conflicts. Maybe we see traces of a new cultural moment, a sort of final goodbye to the false ideas of a weightless postmodernity, living in a mixture of digital media and reality that is no less real.

When this exhibition opens, we are more than a year into the pandemic experience. We have realized that the global is not elsewhere but directly interlinked with our infrastructures, travel, supply chains, contagion networks, etc. We are global, even when we are local and subject to lockdown and travel bans. The pandemic demonstrates that we are all connected, but it also points out that the conditions are still very different between rich and poorer countries, between countries on the same continents, neighborhoods in the same city or young and old citizens. We have been forced to live locally confined. In some cases this has been an enlightening and even spiritual experience, in other cases it has been a disaster. Our friends in dra.ft group in India are even now confronting a devastating surge in cases and deaths.

When we started discussing the Covid 19 and electronic literature, we reflected on the fact that, while there are many public memorials related to wars, there are very few related to

epidemics and diseases. Apart from the horrible scenes we have seen from hospitals around the world, the everyday of the pandemic has for many of us mostly been visible through its lack of the normal, as closed down, deserted cities. There is something unrepresentable about a pandemic caused by an invisible virus. This exhibition portrays all this through art and electronic literature as, we hope, an already historical monument of life under the pandemic. We believe the exhibition demonstrates that the pandemic, besides all its horrors and cancellations, has also been a genuine moment for art and electronic literature.

--Anna Nacher, Søren Pold, and Scott Rettberg

May 1, 2021

COVID E-LIT: Featured works

Alex Saum | Room #3

This video performance work explores how corporate language relates to that other corpora that is the body. A supposedly private conversation between four replicas of the artist gives unto the realization that it, like millions of others, is being recorded, analyzed, and datamined by its platform-host, Zoom.

Jody Zellen | Ghost City Avenue-S

“Avenue S” is a new addition to Zellen’s sprawling piece “Ghost City,” active since 1998. It is an ongoing creation of net art pages containing fragmented images and texts that are a poetic meditation on isolation, nature, walking, politics, and protests during the pandemic. Wander from page to page by clicking on the red boxes; stumble across hidden links; and enjoy the piece’s many surprises.

Claire Fitch | Ear for the Surge

A work about rage, designed to be heard. Found texts covering topics such as COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, online protest, and themes of renewal, uncertainty, and change are reworked into hexameter and put into sound and video -- spoken word, stitched together.

Lai-Tze Fan, Anne Sullivan, and Anastasia Salter | Masked Making: Uncovering Women's Craft Labor During COVID-19

An endless, interactive imagetext generates imaginary masks representing the lives and thoughts of the fictional people who have made them, centering both crafted object and crafter as ephemeral and disposable. The fictional crafters in this piece reflect public examples of real-life crafters in news articles and social media posts, representing the wealth of diversity, age groups, and communities that participate in collective mask making today.

Ben Grosser | The Endless Doomscroller

A lens on our software-enabled collective descent into despair. By distilling the news and social media sites down to their barest most generalized messages and interface conventions, "The Endless Doomscroller" shows us the mechanism that's behind our scroll-induced anxiety: interfaces -- and corporations -- that always want more.

Kyle Booten, Angela Chang, Leonardo Flores, Judy Heflin, Milton Läufer, and Nick Montfort, eds. | Taper #5: Pent Up

Taper is an online literary journal for computational poetry and literary art published twice yearly by Bad Quarto. Amidst global "social distancing," the editorial collective issued an open call for works to reflect upon or chafe against our pandemic-induced confines. The editors sought inspirational pieces to make it easier to pass the time, reach out to others, or thrive while limited to only "virtual" society. In the phrase "Pent Up," pieces also evoked the (false) etymology of the number five (pentagons, pentameters).

Sharon Daniel and Erik Loyer | EXPOSED

EXPOSED documents the spread of COVID-19 inside prisons, jails, and detention centers from the perspective of prisoners, detainees, and their families. Quotes, audio clips, and statistics collected from a comprehensive array of online publications and broadcasts are assembled into an interactive timeline that, on each day, offers abundant testimony to the risk, trauma, and extreme isolation that prisoners experience under coronavirus quarantine.

Mark Sample | Content Moderator Sim

Play as a subcontractor whose job is to keep your social media platform safe and respectable. The game tasks you with either approving or removing social media posts that users have flagged and critiques the role social media platforms have played in contributing to disinformation, conspiracy theories, and intolerance since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Marino Family | Coronation: A Webcomic

Coronation documents the Marino family's experience of the pandemic. Since lockdown began in downtown Los Angeles over a year ago, they've published one comic per day, five days a week, using a combination of digital filters, graphics applications, photographs from family albums, screenshots, downloads from web-based news sources, and hand-drawn images.

Xtine Burrough | I Got Up 2020, Pandemic Edition

Made during the pandemic, these daily vignettes interpret 'getting up' as unusually labor intensive -- creative on the best days and merely possible on the worst. We see Burrough confined to her house while enacting the roles of mother, artist, housekeeper, and teacher. This series is inspired by On Kawara's 1968 - 1979 ritual of sending postcards stamped with the time he 'got up' to two friends each day.

Annie Abrahams | Pandemic Encounter

Breathing is usually an unconscious process shared by all persons, but during the pandemic, it has become a common source of anxiety. This audio track exteriorizes the raw, raspy discomfort of our new reality. It mixes the artist's respiration; computer-generated, distorted heartbeats; and a sound piece called "Silences" by Frans van Lent, which captures the silences of twenty artists from all around the world.

Bilal Mohamed | Lost Inside: A Digital Inquiry

A COVID-era digital journal inspired by J.R Carpenter's "Entre Ville" comprised of hypertext, intimate entries, and personal and visual perspectives highlighting a state of stasis brought on by the quietude and uncertainty of the outer world. The purpose of this work is to create an intimate space for rumination on the experience of life under quarantine and a pandemic.

Amaranth Borsuk | Curt Curtal Sonnet Corona

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nick Montfort published "Sonnet Corona," a tiny program that can generate a crown of 3^{14} or 4,782,969 potential sonnets. Its 14 monometer lines evoke the enclosure and uncertainty of the early lockdown. "Curt Curtal Sonnet Corona" utilizes Montfort's code to generate 4^{11} or 4,194,304 curtal, 11-line sonnets with 4 variables per line.

Lissa Holloway-Attaway and Jamie Fawcus | PATTER(n)INGS: Apt. 3B

An interactive audio experience that moves between deep materiality and immaterial illusion, all reconstructed by a single eavesdropper-user, also ideally in semi-isolation. It explores themes of intimacy, proximity, disruption, and mediation during a pandemic lockdown through audio-only documentation of suspended being(s) inside the many rooms of Apt. 3B (wherever that is).

Giulia Carla Rossi | The British Library Simulator

A short browser-based game first published in June 2020 while the Library buildings were closed, giving visitors a chance to learn interesting facts about its physical location and about the Library as a whole. At the time, it kept the public abreast of services the Library continued to provide even during lockdown, highlighting ongoing projects and digital content that could still be accessed from home.

Diogo Marques, João Santa Cruz, and Daniela Reis | RE\VERSE: an elegiac e-poem

Following a random plus (pre-)combinatorial logic, 40 textual verses and 40 pictorial fragments intertwine in order to provoke a self-reflexive reading of the verse(s) and reverse(s) characterizing the experience of confinement. Combined, image and text (un)veil a dialogic path that, although necessarily entropic, is made of continuous renewal.

Piotr Marecki, Kamil Gorgh Trzaska, Krzysztof Kaz, and Michał Caruso | Polska przydrożna /
Roadside Poland

An anti-racer designed for the 8-bit Atari, immersed in demoscene aesthetics and the general climate of retro games. Roadside Poland references the book Polska przydrożna by Marecki, where the protagonist wriggles around small towns in the Polish countryside instead of straightforwardly traveling. The demo itself is devoid of elements characteristic of racers (car, speed, movement, attractive landscapes), testifying to the pandemic time in which it was made.

René Bauer and Beat Suter | ToniZ

ToniZ.ch is the digital twin of Toni Areal, the building that houses the Zurich University of the Arts. After the March 2020 lockdown, the building was completely shut off for several months. ToniZ.ch tries to (ironically, symbolically) reclaim some of it for students and teachers. Bachelor and Master graduation ceremonies were held in it, with all students and teachers present and able to interact with each other.

Judy Malloy | merged with the screen for days

In “merged with the screen for days,” computer-generated stanzas move across a four-array structure and play together unpredictably, permitting multiple views if the reader generates several versions. It simulates the computer-mediated environments that dominated our lives in 2020. The history of generative poetry is referenced in the background by Jonathan Swift's Lagado Engine from Gulliver's Travels.

Patrick Lichty | Confinement Spaces: Isolation. and Loss in the Pandemic

An existential visual narrative of living in the United Arab Emirates under lockdown from March - August 2020, created using scans of the local landscape taken with an iPhone and 3D scanning software. The work features a series of twelve interactive spaces rendered as pastiches of the eighty-two scanned spaces made during the first half-year of the pandemic, resulting in a glitched, dream-like experience.

Andanconnerdercu Utterings | Breathing

Confronts the viewer with a “being” that is the result of an intricate, active, interlaced communicative structure in which both humans and machines are involved in a process of shared auditory exchange and attention. Through the mixing of six audio and video streams emerges an image of a phantom-like breathing, pulsating entity that thrives through affection, attention, glitches, delays and even voids.

Alan Bigelow | Sentenced to Covid: Voices of the Pandemic

Displays single-sentence responses to the pandemic that stretch the full length of a screen, sliding into view a single letter at a time. Responses can be read in manual or auto mode, and visitors to the site can write their own responses for others to see.

Giselle Beiguelman | Coronário / Coronary

A hypertextual essay about the cultural experience of the coronavirus, with emphasis on Brazilian daily life. It features a set of 25 words popularized in the context of the pandemic such as Zoom and lockdown, supplemented by a small glossary. A heat map dynamically highlights the words visitors to the site check in this lexicon. Those most accessed by the audience change their color on a scale that varies from blue (cooler) to red (hotter and, therefore, more accessed).

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