

The Shape of Now

Just as Germany went into its first stage of lock down, my yearlong residency in Berlin was coming to an end. My flight home to South Africa cancelled, I resolved to stay put for the yet undetermined time of Covid, luckily holding on to my studio until further notice.

As all art institutions around the world shut down, galleries and museums began to replace their scheduled programs with “online exhibitions” (which is just another name for websites). This bull headed forward march; insisting, “the show must go on” misses the point that this is precisely not the moment to continue with business as usual. Moreover, I fear that this move acts to further dematerialise the already evaporating material substance of contemporary art. This approach lends itself more easily to mediums such as video, photography, and what can generally be termed ‘digital art’.

While many of these online strategies can be read cynically as mere advertisements for the institutions, who exploit the artist as ‘content producer’, there have also been genuine acts of generosity by artists and performers who make their videos available for free streaming, poets who share readings of their work and musicians who live stream concerts from their bedrooms. Here, I caution against losing sight of the exhibition or the live performance as important rituals for creating physical space of gathering, networking and forming community.

One among other unimaginative initiatives is the charity art auction- notwithstanding the immense deprivation, exacerbated by (but not exclusive to) the Covid outbreak, and the obscene wealth within the art-buying public, there is an expectation of artists to take on ‘social responsibility’- narrowly defined as the benevolent donation of artworks as commodity objects, to be sold as incentives for the rich to part with small portions of their fortunes.

This is certainly not to say that artists and their practices should exist outside of the shared responsibility of being social. Rather, artists are especially well positioned to guide us through the ‘portal’, which has been opened by the pandemic (to paraphrase Arundathi Roy). But, the above-mentioned tactics, limited by their institutionalism, will not be the vessel through which we travel.

Now, as the pandemic has temporarily stripped away the institutions on which the global art scene relies; the museums, the art fairs, the galleries and so on, the more fundamental questions about what it means to be an artist are laid bare, beyond of the noise of those infrastructures that breed competition, commercialism and conservatism.

While activists, social justice organisations, academics (and others) work hard, collectively, and with much imagination to make possible, that which was once impossible (As Rebecca Solnit reminds us), they are burdened by the real world limitations of the here and now.

The unique luxury of being an artist is that our work is by definition anti-logical, anti-utilitarian. It is precisely our work to actualise impossible proposals, to form them into existence, an existence that is both fantastical and real, ethereal and eternal...

I am not insisting on Political art (with a capital P), rather, for artists to work politically. To me, this involves imagining together, learning from activists how to think collectively, learning from academics how to take seriously the potentiality of our mediums, learning from social justice organisations how to care for one another. But also, this means fiercely holding on to that which is particular to the role of the artist; being in and of this world, while also bringing new ones into being.