

How do we approach arts research in a pandemic?

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Inevitably, I suggest we will approach arts research in a pandemic as we have approached the pandemic itself. What this means is the methods we use will be contextualised by the five stages we experience during any state of personal misfortune (Kübler-Ross, 1969), these being: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

How does research continue within each of these stages? In the first instance, we deny how our research can possibly be affected. To us, our project is mysteriously insulated from what has happened. In the second stage, we may become angry that our research is impacted in this way, that our project has been disrupted by circumstances we have no control over. We take an indignant position toward what has happened and its impact on our research. Thirdly, we try to think of ways to negotiate a better outcome. Perhaps, if we can compromise aspects of the research then maybe most of it can be salvaged. At the fourth stage, all purpose is lost, there seems no point in carrying on. We conclude the project is destined to fail and will not to succeed. In the final stage, we accept the circumstances as they are and we continue to do what we had originally planned, even though everything has fundamentally changed.

What this signals is the difficulty we have in acknowledging how things, including arts research, will not return to normal because normal as we once understood it has completely altered. The language of control and surveillance, so readily deployed during a pandemic, work in opposition to the aims of objective research. How can we make use of research methods if they are circumscribed by the pandemic conditions setting their context? Of course, what unifies any pandemic is the sense of solidarity that emerges in us, once we accept that a virus does not recognise social boundaries such as class, gender or race: we are all pitched in a battle against the virus regardless (Žižek, 2020).

Across the globe, the incoherent strategies of different nations and their governments, indicated by the range of statistics showing the spread and effect of the virus, is a clear sign that even those who are supposed to know what they are doing simply don't have any clear the answers. This is familiar territory for most people engaged in research and specifically those involved in arts research. We are consistently operating at the limits of what we know and necessarily have to respond to ever-changing circumstances. While the common ground we occupy is one of uncertainty and ambiguity, the aim of research to refine these conditions with clarity and precision, is reasonably consistent and clear. Governments, however, appear to be encumbered with a much more complex problem relating to the priority of health over the economic wealth of a nation.

Research is always about advancing a question beyond the realms of one's interests. Arts research is no different, it cannot be, as is so often the case, confined to a process that addresses a single form of practice. As with the global pandemic, where the problem extends to each and every one of us to contribute part of the solution. In the present historical moment, arts research should look beyond its conditions of production and distribution to a wider cause, wherein its purpose is ruthlessly interrogated. From this standpoint, arts research may well be undertaken by an individual but it should always be, categorically, carried out in the interests of everyone. Since we cannot live the same life we lived before, we must all play a part in how it is reconfigured in the future. This involves how we confront what it is we do on a daily, even moment by moment basis.

Returning to the five-stages or states we experience when we undergo some form of trauma, it is important to remember they are not necessarily experienced in any particular order and we do not always experience them all equally. This begs the question as to whether, as we embark on arts research during a pandemic, we are quite simply stuck in a permanent state of denial.

References:

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Žižek, S., 2020, Monitor and Punish? Yes, Please!, The Philosophers Salon, webpage viewed: May 2020.

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