

PANDEMIC: Art Making in Lockdown. Anthony Schrag

Background Context and Research Question

During the Covid-19 lockdown, I was awarded the Royal Society of Edinburgh's PANDEMIC award which aimed to support artistic practice in these unparalleled times. As my practice is concerned with physical, participatory methodologies, I aimed to explore how my practice was impacted by the Covid-19 restrictions, and took two parallel approaches. The first explored how collective and collaborative ways of creation could be supported when 'being together' was impossible. The second looked how 'embodied cognition' could be used express the complex psychological changes that were occurring to myself and others in the face of isolation and lockdown.

Methodology:

The project utilised an Arts Based Research approach to explore this question. Arts Based Research (ABR) is a qualitative methodology that applies artistic approaches to "explore, understand and challenge human action and experience" (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014 p.1). In applying a systematic use of artistic processes (McNiff 2013), it leads to different way of understanding by "recognising the use of the arts as critical in achieving self/others knowledge" (Leavy 2015 p.200). As ABR aims to transform situations through collaboration, participation, dialogue and experiences, it was felt an apt methodology to explore both notions of 'collective creativity' but also a personal response. Practically, this consisted of inviting multiple participants to contribute an artwork that was responding to a single theme, and these responses were then presented in a collective online exhibition space for the participants (and a wider public) to reflect on common themes emerging over lockdown. This was repeated three times, with three different themes: Rhyme, Stacked and Absence.

The personal response was deeply influenced by Embodied Cognition which argues that "embodiment seems to be at the root of seemingly disparate relationships between higher-order thoughts and basic bodily action" (Balcutis and Cole, 2009 p.762). In other words, it links the bodies actions to metaphorical and conceptual concepts, and as such, is a useful way to reflexively explore complex psychological experiences. Practically, this consisted of reflecting on emotional responses daily, and developing tacit physical responses that were then documented in photographic form, and dozens of images could then be compared over the course of the months. These built up to a portfolio of changing representations of a person in lockdown.

Findings:

As an artistic project, the findings exist within the outputs - these consisted of three digital zines (Rhyme: https://www.flipsnack.com/rhymezine/rhymezine_issue_one.html Stacked: https://www.flipsnack.com/rhymezine/stacked-2_final.html and Absence: <https://www.flipsnack.com/rhymezine/absence.html>). It also resulted in a Digital Exhibition: <https://royalscottishacademy.viewingrooms.com/viewing-room/4-pandemic-a-personal-response-to-covid-19/> and a physical exhibition at the RSA (23 May 2021 - 20 June 2021 - <https://www.royalscottishacademy.org/exhibitions/pandemic-a-personal-response-to-covid-19-2/>) . Additionally, the digital zines were printed for the physical exhibition (300 copies each) and an online seminar that I set up as a **knowledge exchange** event to explore art making in lockdown.

The key works contribute to a growing field of artistic responses to the pandemic (see for example, Manchester International Festival 2021 (<https://lwlies.com/festivals/manchester-international-festival-2021-cillian-murphy/>) or the recent survey by BBC (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52296886>)), but also provide an insight into the Scottish context. The links to the Zines are available above, and have included links to three of the physical works here:

- Absence: <https://royalscottishacademy.viewingrooms.com/content/feature/111/artworks-8000-anthony-schrag-absence-ii-2020/>
- Comfort: <https://royalscottishacademy.viewingrooms.com/artworks/8015-anthony-schrag-comfort/>
- Work life balance: <https://royalscottishacademy.viewingrooms.com/content/feature/111/artworks-8016-anthony-schrag-work-life-balance-daily-performances-2020/>

References

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