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Art and Space During the Coronavirus

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Abstract

This article explores how the coronavirus has influenced and ultimately harmed the arts. In particular, this article explores how the coronavirus is an issue that overshadows other important issues. Moreover, the coronavirus provides an excuse for political groups to decimate artistic spaces. Therefore, we should be careful not to assume that a revised interest in the arts during the coronavirus crisis will ultimately benefit the arts.

Key words: Coronavirus, murals, painting, political economics, urban space.

Much of the world's attention has been refocused on the coronavirus. Indeed, it has directed our attention away from other life and death problems that may determine whether the human species survive the Twenty-First century: global heating, nuclear war, political corruption, ethnic-racial conflict, poverty, etc. That is even to the extent that these issues make it harder for many to deal with the coronavirus, the issue of the coronavirus makes it hard to discuss other issues. It may seem that this is an effect of the mass media centering attention on issues that grab

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headlines. Yet, what is coronavirus doing to artistic space? This is important because artistic space provides a way to heal the problems caused by the mass media and the socially destructive politics it enables.¹ In this essay, I argue that coronavirus is placing itself at the center of global artistic perception and turning artistic spaces into forums on the coronavirus in ways that potentially destroy the possibility of future artistic expression. I am using a rather broad definition of art to include two-dimensional and three-dimensional arts, cinema, theatre, music, culinary arts, and literary arts, all of which depend on communities in space to thrive.

Coronavirus substitutes the quarantine for the original context of the artwork.² For example, an article in *The Guardian* argued that Edward Hopper was now the artist of the age of coronavirus. This assertion was made because of the eerie resemblance of his empty cityscapes and the similarly empty quarantined cities.³ I do not want to argue that people cannot think this, however, Hopper was not painting people who were alone because a virus forced them. Rather, Hopper was painting the impossible promise of urban life, the faux-social immersion which people could not deal with. His paintings depicted aloneness in cities at a time when U.S. cities were centers of manufacturing.⁴ Rather than commenting on restricted mobility, much of Hopper's work was influenced by tourist spaces—hotels—and his early-career work as an illustrator for hotel-industry magazines.⁵ Coronavirus presents people with urban space sans this illusion of social immersion where they could previously forget our isolation or the possibility of similar relief from travel. Therefore, coronavirus not only overtakes cities by spreading death but also the consequences of social-distancing to prevent infection limits peoples' ability to understand artwork in its proper context.

The coronavirus has become subject matter for socially conscious murals and graffiti. In the Gaza Strip, Palestine a mural says that protecting people from the coronavirus is saving the earth (a person with a surgical mask is next to a woman holding a tree).⁶ In Dakar, Senegal, RBS CREW who is a "graffiti collective"

painted murals informing people about what to do to protect themselves from coronavirus.⁷ In Moscow, Russia there is a mural with “fight” written in Russian next to a medical center for coronavirus survivors.⁸ While these murals are reassuring and useful, they only tacitly respond to underlying problems. Climate change is likely to hit the southern hemispheres first. Israel has made it difficult to protect Palestinians from the coronavirus.⁹ In the United States, coronavirus infects a higher percentage of African Americans compared with other races.¹⁰ It is predicted that developing countries will soon be hit hard and not have the resources—nor assistance from wealthy countries—to fight the coronavirus.¹¹ Therefore, murals and graffiti in spaces of oppression that have been denied the resources to treat coronavirus may help oppressed people take self-initiative to protect themselves,¹² but this places the responsibility for ending the coronavirus on them, rather than those with the resources to help. Moreover, impoverished people in these areas often cannot afford to social distance and sometimes do not even have water to wash their hands. Thus, it may be more an example of something that a large general segment of the (rich) world colonizing artistic spaces which could be used more productively to produce thought about other more pressing issues. If the arts are often either a means for oppressed people to express themselves or at least often made by financially marginalized artists, then it seems cruel that artists should have to use this space to do medical outreach that was once the fiscal and political responsibility of governments.

The effect of the coronavirus may be destroying artistic infrastructure rather than providing a subject matter that makes artists more relevant to a broader portion of the public. The coronavirus constricts the actual physical spaces of the arts. For example, in Japan, instead of forcing corporate headquarters to telework—thus taking people out of crowded subways and trains—the Japanese government has urged nightclubs,¹³ bars, and live houses and sports gyms to close. People should refrain from going to these spaces where poor ventilation and loud talk by many people facilitate the spread of coronavirus.¹⁴ Fair

enough. Good advice. However, packed subway cars are somehow O.K. As with elsewhere in the world, workers at artistic venues and other nightclubs cannot earn money during such quarantines.¹⁵ The Japanese media also focused on neighborhoods where youth culture is strongly expressed such as Shibuya,¹⁶ not how the largely uninterrupted, often crowded white-collar office work may spread coronavirus. From a more global perspective, the arts can be seen as creating “rituals” which create community¹⁷ and thus, their loss is no small thing that can easily be brought back once economies recover from the effects of coronavirus. Nonetheless, the long-term consequences of coronavirus for the artworld are hardly an inevitable outcome. Germany has given 500 million euros to freelancers and artists¹⁸ and funding to spaces that support them.¹⁹ In sum, the coronavirus has often facilitated a shutdown of spaces of creativity but not corporate spaces.

In conclusion, the coronavirus as an issue overtakes and infects the arts, changing spaces of resistance into spaces of homogenized and often corporate thought. The issue of the coronavirus first of all projects itself onto previous artistic achievements, altering their meaning into medical, not social terms. Secondly, the issue of the coronavirus projects itself into oppressed peoples’ physical spaces, the cities and the neighborhoods they live in, thus masquerading as a public service message, but making it difficult for other important messages to be portrayed. While information about the coronavirus is crucial for people in these areas, official information backed up by solid medical help and the ability to social distance would be more helpful. Rather, the art here takes on a neo-liberal, personal responsibility ethos, not a critique of power. Social distancing, though necessary, rarely supports artists who cannot work and venues that provide space for their creativity. In the wake of emptying city streets, there is a void. The use of space for business only flows into this void. Thus, the coronavirus enables neoliberalism to turn artistic spaces into what Henri Lefevre calls “abstract space,” seen not just by its destruction of what existed

before, but by its requirement of a “silence of the users” of certain spaces which people accept without resistance.²⁰

Notes:

¹ Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*

² This echoes Walter Benjamin’s concerns about the loss of “aura”, and hence context, for artwork, see Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

³ Jones, “We Are All Edward Hopper Paintings Now’:

⁴ Robert Morris, “American Quartet.”

⁵ Mazow, “Introducing Edward Hopper’s Hotels.”

⁶ The Guardian, “Coronavirus Street Art in Pictures.”

⁷ USA Today, “Coronavirus Inspires World Graffiti.:

⁸ The Guardian, “Coronavirus Street Art in Pictures.”

⁹ Tanous, “Coronavirus Outbreak in the Time of Apartheid.”

¹⁰ Eligon, John, Audra D. S. Burch, Dionne Searcey and Richard A. Oppel Jr., “Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus Infection in Some States.”

¹¹ Faiola, Raghavan, Max and McCoy. “Public health experts: Coronavirus could overwhelm the developing world.”

¹² This call for self assistance rather than government support echoes the philosophy of neoliberal economics.

¹³ While not exactly what I mean by the arts, this has also enabled sexist and moralistic space in ways that harm women. For example, female sex workers and women that work in hostess clubs—that is are paid to drink and converse with men—have not been able to receive unemployment benefits, see Kyodo, “Concerns as Japan’s Sex Workers Excluded from Freelance Virus Payouts.”

¹⁴ Dr. Kiyosu Taniguchi, director of the clinical research department at the National Mie Hospital in western Japan, also calls for young people to avoid “the three conditions” where risks of infections are high -- a place with poor air circulation or ventilation, congested spaces and having close contact with other people” as quoted in Ogawa and Misano, “Youths also face risk of becoming gravely ill with COVID-19: Japan doctors..

¹⁵ Russel, “Tokyo DJs and owners say closing clubs to curb virus is easier said than done.”

¹⁶ For a subtle example of this see NHK, “Less people around Tokyo’s Shibuya station.”

¹⁷ Scott, “What Happens When We Lose the Art That Brings Us All Together?”

¹⁸ The Editors of Artnews, “Germany Gives \$551 M. in Coronavirus Funds to Artists and Freelancers...”

¹⁹ Reuters, “Germany to provide aid to artists, event firms hit by coronavirus.”

²⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 50-51.

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