

A photograph of an open notebook with a grid pattern. On the left page, a yellow pencil with a black eraser and a black pen are lying diagonally. A red highlighter is lying horizontally on the right page. The text is written on the right page in black and red ink.

An Entry from
non-existent
my ~~X~~ Daily Journal

by Kristina Borg



Image by the author.

March 31st, Malta 2020

Freedom Day, but we're all locked up indoors.

Tuesday, but as we lose track of time, it feels somewhat like a Friday.

6pm - more or less 24 hours before the first zoom meeting of the COVID-19 special ACMLab series: Creating opportunity out of crisis.

I just ended a preparatory Skype call with the organisers and speakers of this first session.

Davinia asks the dreaded question, "And you, Kristina, what will you be presenting?"

And with a nervous laugh I answer, "I don't know, I have no idea yet."

And she questions, "What hope can you bring to us?"

I wonder, how and where do I fit in all this?

Why did they invite me, and not another artist who might have a more direct answer to what they're looking for?

Once again, as artists we are asked to show resilience, to bring hope.

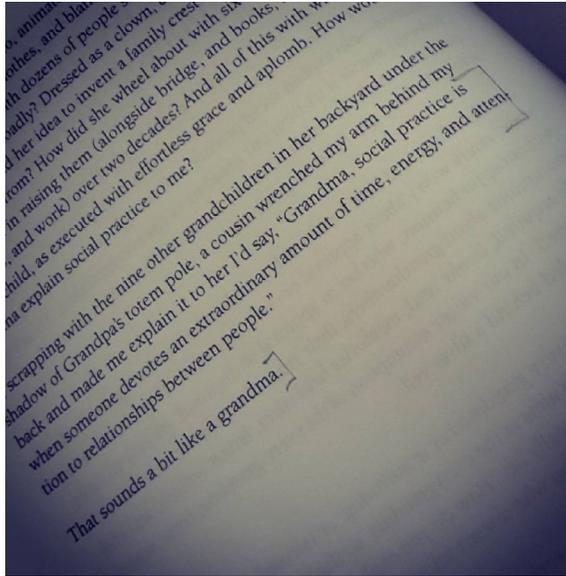
My artistic research and practice can be described as Socially Engaged Art – a practice which often remains on the margins of the artistic spectrum, at times not even considered as Art.

I stop.

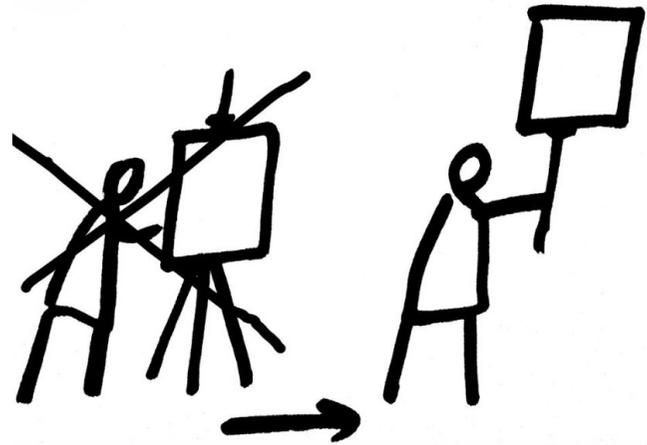
And I think.

I stop on the word 'socially' and I find, or assume, that there's the link that the organisers saw.

In my interdisciplinary research-practice I spend time integrating into specific communities, and as I become a neighbour, I devote my attention to relationships



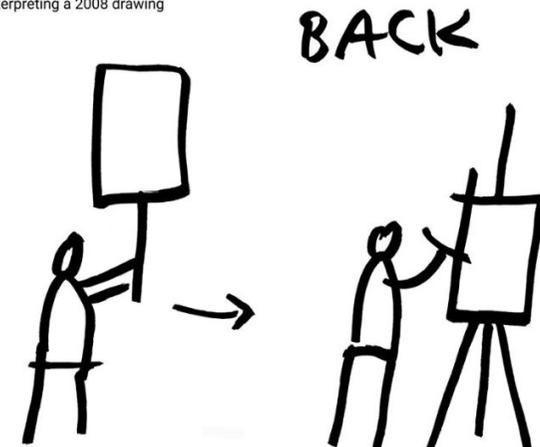
Page from *The questions we ask together* (2015), Open Engagement In Print 001, edited by Gemma-Rose Turnbull. Image by the author.



between people. I try to enter into a direct dialogue with the community members and their place, most often in relation to socio-political issues in urban and collective spaces. So, two key elements underlying all my work are: (i) direct human interaction, and (ii) the public space – two factors which are now out of reach, two physical experiences which are strongly banned.

After all my efforts to move out from the comfort of my studio, to contextualise my artistic work in the space out there, with all the risks that it can entail, I am now obliged to go back indoors, lock myself up and practise social distancing.

reinterpreting a 2008 drawing



30.03.2020

Drawings by Dan Perjovschi, 2008 and 2020.



An online meme image. Graphic designed by Diaan Mynhardt, based on social psychology principles.

I understand that this new buzzword – ‘social distancing’ – comes from public health and epidemiology lexicon, but as a Socially Engaged Artist I refuse to follow it. Instead, I prefer to practise physical distancing, or perhaps, social connectedness with physical distance.

As I cherish the beauty of meeting and working directly with people, this physical distancing simply becomes ever more challenging... frustrating.

Like fellow creatives I try to switch to the virtual world and brainstorm on what I can offer, what I can share, what projects can be twisted and what can continue, instead of simply cancelling or postponing.

But switching online is not always the solution!



You Are What You Buy 2017, performance at a local supermarket – a project by the author. Image by Matthew Calleja.

Community members I work with might not be in the mood of exposing their domestic space, others might not have access to our virtual world or are not as tech savvy as we wish. I also think about past projects that I might be able to share, but, after all, who am I to simply take someone’s story from a past project and upload it online? I wonder if there are any similarities when connecting in the digital space vs connecting in the real space. Up to a few days ago we were all acknowledging how these new instant forms of communication – enabled by technology – while helping us become more connected, they were at the same time making us less connected, locking us up in our private bubbles.

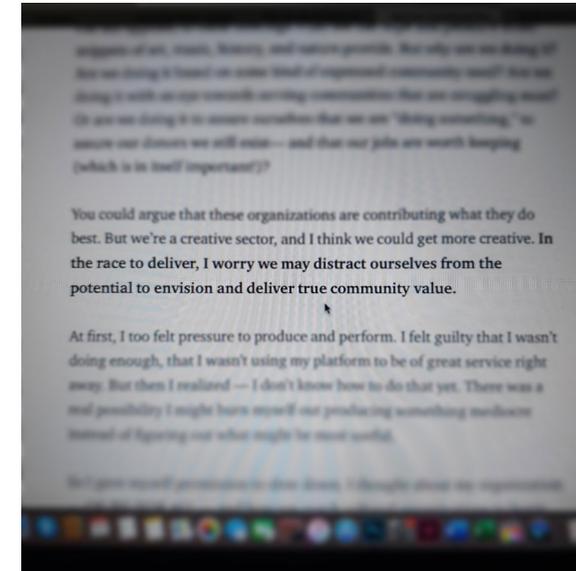
The more I think on whether my work can lend itself to teleworking or not, the more I panic.

I might have ridiculed the toilet paper panic buying spree, but at a certain point, I feel the same rush of panic. I cannot contribute with any work to the new binge streaming of free museum tours, concerts, shows and exhibitions.

It's ironic how as we enter long days of crisis everyone reverts to art and creative practices, to ease out the boredom or to lift up one's spirits. I see nothing wrong in that, fine, but I think we need to be very cautious on how the precarious job of the artist is perceived.

As I write through this entry, a friend of mine shares with me an article, in which [Nina Simon](#) argues, "These forms of rapid response are timely and meaningful... And it makes me wonder: is this the most meaningful way cultural organisations can contribute – or is it just the fastest way? ... In the race to deliver, I worry we may distract ourselves from the potential to envision and deliver true community value."

And as I continue running the race to deliver, I open up and reach out for help by asking questions on an international online group dedicated to Socially Engaged practices. I bombard my post with endless questions, and to my surprise, the founder of this online group



Laptop screen streaming Nina Simon's article. Image by the author.

meticulously answers each question, one by one. Yet, in those answers, I did not find any solution, or perhaps, I did not find the solution I was expecting.

I stop running.
And I think.

I try to make sense of the 'social' around me and try to find my place within.
I reflect on the second new buzzword – 'social solidarity' – by which I would like to specifically move beyond the notion of 'sharing services for free'. I admit that up until a few days ago, in my daily life, I always perceived a



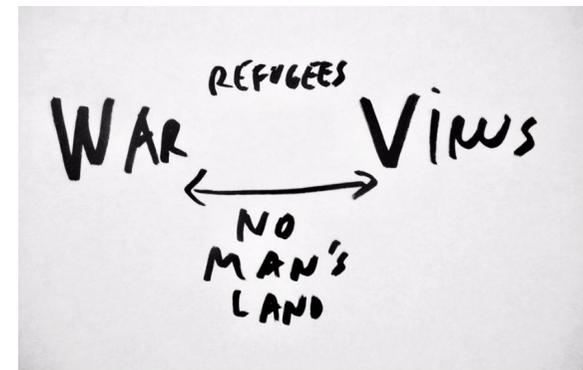
An online meme image.



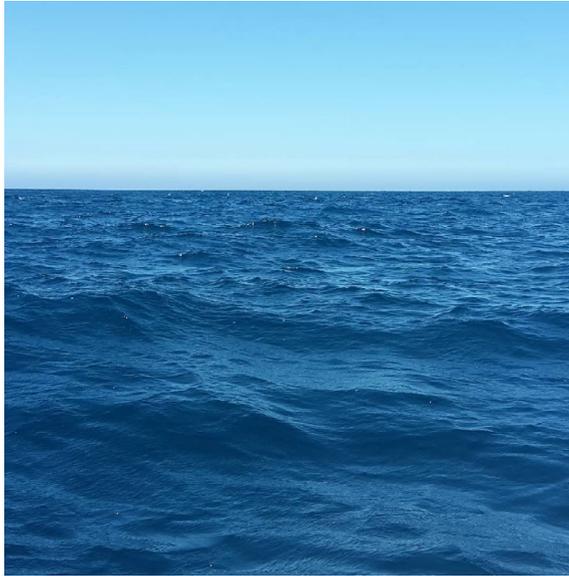
Sliema, Malta, March 2020. A collage taken from a public post shared on [Din l-Art Helwa](#) Facebook public group.

general lack of sensitivity towards one another. So why does it have to be THIS crisis in particular to convince us otherwise? Wasn't climate change, or the construction greed, or the closure of borders to migrants already a crisis in themselves, risking our health, that of others and our planet?

What is all this 'social solidarity' about? Is it fake? Is it real? Are we sure that it's a turning point in our lives? Am I being too cynical in doubting it? Or perhaps too selfish? I might have lost my income yes, but at least I am able to shelter in a place I call home. I also have the luxury to access Zoom, easily connect with others, with no difficulties whatsoever!



Drawing by Dan Perjovschi, 2020.



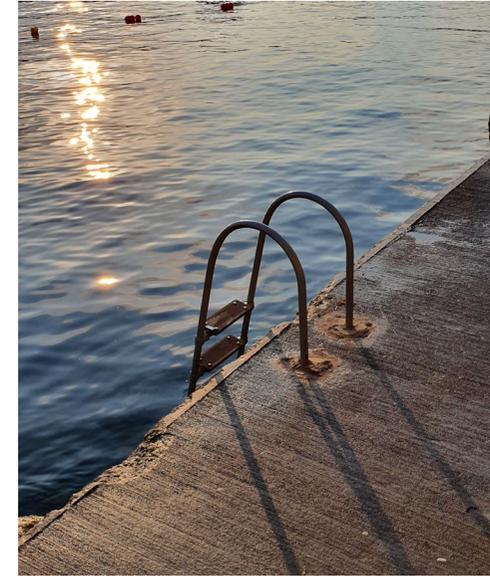
Jien u l-medda, office for the day, Malta 2018. Image by the author.

And that feels good!

So, what am I really experiencing? Is it crisis or stress? I am called to offer hope, to alleviate stress, to be creative and come up with opportunities in times of crisis. I feel the need to do more. I want to do more.

I want to offer that same ray of hope that an elderly gentleman and survivor of WWII once shared with me, when he proudly said, “I’m the famous dishwasher [of the concentration camp] who became a millionaire kid.”

And I try to imagine how our grandparents survived their time of crisis, without the luxury of zoom, skype,



Kalkara Creek, Malta 2019. Image by the author.

Facebook and what not.

For a moment I shift to old school methods, and decide to make a couple of calls.

I phone called an elderly group of community members, who were collaborating in one of the projects I am involved in. I had the perfect excuse to check in as I update them on the postponing of the project, thanks to the extension of Arts Council Malta’s funds. By now they all saved my number in their phone book, and so they greet me by my first name. As I hear the colourful warmth in their voice, I feel energised to make a second attempt and start running again.

I feel I have found one brilliant idea, one possibility to continue working on one of the community projects I had.

This new twist might not form part of the original concept, but it might keep some connection with our digital audience.

Of course, this means new work, and as I try to convince the community organisation personnel – on the other end of the phone – I realise that it’s all in vain.

It might not be the right moment to suggest new things, people might attribute different values to the same experiences. It was very obvious that the organisation was seeing to other community needs.

I don’t easily take ‘No’ as an answer.

I might give it one more try, when the time comes, but I might also let go of what I cannot control.

So, I pause my running and respect everyone’s journey, priorities and emotions.

As [Aisha Ahmad](#) suggests, and as most of us read in her article which ended up viral on all our Facebook walls, we need to “cut out the noise”.

I plan to cut out the noise and instead “replace noise with flowers”, as a group of nine-year-old kids declared last June.



[Nimxu Mixja](#) (*Let's take a walk*) 2019.
Image by Elisa von Brockdorff.

I understand that first I need to plant the seeds.
I might not be able yet to offer you a tangible hope, a tangible alternative.

As my artistic practice itself taught me, I will allow the process to guide me through.

I usually never have any answers at the onset of a project, until I actually start experiencing it and living it day by day. Indeed, providing a rapid response might not be one of my strong points, but instead of panic buying, I will focus on what I’m good at.



Image by the author.

I will,

observe
reflect
listen,

three skills I constantly make use of in my artistic
research and practice.

I will create the opportunity for reflection, and revisit my
creative practice – something I've been longing to do so in
the pre-COVID-19 saga days.



Gozo 2019. Image by the author.

I want to reflect on the practice of 'social solidarity', how
this became the most cherished value of all, and how we
can guarantee its sustainability and long-term effect.

I was never good at running, but as I observe my
surroundings, I'm sure I'll find the silver lining of these
overcast days.

WRITTEN BY
Kristina Borg
March 2020

This reflective piece was presented at the first zoom meeting of the **COVID-19 special ACMLab series: Creating opportunity out of crisis**, held on 1st April 2020, and organised by Arts Council Malta and ARC Research and Consultancy.

About the author

Kristina Borg is a freelance socially engaged artist and an art educator. In her interdisciplinary research-practice she spends time integrating into specific communities and devotes her attention to relationships between people. In dialogue with the community and/or the place, her work focuses on socio-political issues in urban-collective spaces.

She holds a Bachelor's degree in Art Education and a Master's degree in Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies. Borg placed first in the 3rd edition of Divergent Thinkers-Malta and she forms part of the Salzburg Global Forum for Young Cultural Innovators. She collaborated in a number of local and international projects as artist, curator, exhibition designer and project manager.

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