The Sunday Times
May 3, 2020

THE TIMES

Will lockdown change how we make art?

Covid-19 is not just changing how artists work, but how they see the world, says Bryan Appleyard

Bryan Appleyard

Interior design: Michael Craig-Martin in front of one of his artworks. MAY TSE/GETTY

In the 14th century the Black Death — bubonic plague — killed half the population of Europe. Simultaneously the Renaissance, the greatest of all art movements, was being born. By the mid-15th century, the first wave of Renaissance geniuses — Fra Angelico, Brunelleschi, Donatello, Alberti and Piero della Francesca — were at work. Art is what humans do in spite of, often because of, catastrophes. So what are artists doing now?

Covid-19 is nothing like the Black Death, and we aren't living in 14th-century Europe. We live in a vastly more populated, densely connected and technologically advanced world. We can lock ourselves down but still be in touch. Yet it still feels like a catastrophe — perhaps because our sheer dumb luck had made us feel immune.

"I've often felt I have belonged to the luckiest generation that's ever lived," says the artist Michael Craig-Martin. "I have spent my whole life without a major disaster, without a war . . . And now, towards the end of my life, this is my generation's big disaster."

We have lost so much of what the ever-more affluent postwar generations could not conceive of losing: shopping, partying and, most of all, the freedom to travel and to roam. Musicians feel this more than most.

“A concert pianist has two modes of working,” the great pianist Stephen Hough says. “On stage in concert and at home in preparation. The first of these has completely stopped and the other intensified more than ever.”

Much of the pre-Covid life of a classical musician was spent on planes, flying from one concert hall to the next. That has stopped and may never fully recover. The financial justification of the great halls of the world is looking thinner than ever. The spread of great performances has been checked.

“I fear,” Hough says, “there will be many arts organisations that will never reappear or will be totally changed, from orchestras down to small concert series. Many individual musicians, actors, dancers may never work again. Let’s hope this is not true.”

Hough, in this context, is lucky. He is a composer and a writer, both jobs better done by staying at home. He calls this period “a forced sabbatical without guilt”.

“I’m trying to dive deep into work as a way to live through this time of incomparable strangeness and uncertainty. The scratch of a pencil on a page or a key being struck is a familiar comfort.”

The Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, whose In Real Life exhibition at Tate Modern was a popular sensation, also welcomes immobility as a spiritual revelation. He is in lockdown in Berlin. “I honestly don’t recall when I last spent over a full month in the same spot,” he says. “This gives me a feeling of groundedness that I, amid the challenges that we experience these days, am very grateful for.”

Olafur Eliasson: ‘the focus on empathy and care that we are experiencing will stay with us’ JUDITH BURROWS

“It’s given everybody a chance to see what life is like without the pressures of modern life,” Craig-Martin says.

Life in lockdown flows with fewer interruptions, offering the artist new possibilities. But will this novelty survive the end of lockdown?

“Now it’s all uncertain,” Hough says, “but rather than feeling listless it’s somehow made me free to explore. There’s space in my day, in my life. At least for now. Ask me again how I feel in a month if this is ongoing and open-ended!”

Lockdown has certainly transformed the subject matter of Craig-Martin's art. He made his name with beautifully elegant outlines of ordinary manufactured objects: tables, chairs, glasses.

"I've always drawn mass-produced manmade objects. Over the last weeks I've been drawing flowers, fruit and vegetables. It doesn't seem to make sense to draw other kinds of things when one's kind of cut off from that world. It didn't feel right.

"The only place I ever go is the supermarket. And the most striking things in the supermarket are obviously fruit, vegetable and flowers — everything else is just packaging. I felt like I needed to register what I was doing. I mean, I'm drawing food. As the only things one sees, you know, I must be obsessed with food. I've never cooked for myself in my whole life all the time, and now I make myself two or three meals a day."

He says he was prepared for this because he lives and, mostly, works alone. But perhaps we were all made ready for lockdown by the gadgets that surround us. The designer and architect Thomas Heatherwick thinks we were preparing for this, even though we didn't know we were.

"The world was conspiring to design itself for us to be at home over the past 20 years," he says. "The digital revolution was set up so you could order food to your home rather than going to the baker, the butcher or the grocer's. There are fewer people sending letters because of email. This digital revolution is driving us into the position where we can watch any film in higher quality than ever from home. You can do a PhD as well in bed. So, in a sense, we've been rehearsing for this moment over the past 15, 20 years. And technologies such as Zoom and Skype existed already: here they were, waiting for people to have to use them."

Lockdown becomes a more aggressive version of being unable to take our eyes off the screen. However, we can focus on more and better things. At least in our homes we can take time to think and not be completely enslaved by the Silicon Valley monopolists.

Heatherwick has some huge projects in hand — an airport terminal in Singapore alongside the architects KPF, and a vast development for Google in California. But they are long-term and a pause in construction does not mean he has had to stop working on them. In fact, his work has taken on a new, strange form of magic. The technology can create new connections.

Thomas Heatherwick: 'the world was conspiring to design itself for us to be at home' CHRISTIAN ALMINANA/GETTY

“In some senses, some of us are having a more social time now. I’m connecting with people I’ve worked with for 15 years, and I’ve never been in their home. I’ve never seen their living room, their children, their bedroom. So there are some social barriers that have been broken now, where we’re close, we’re sort of more human.

“Also I’m drawing more. We all draw together on screen. So I draw on the screen and another line appears from nowhere and you don’t know who drew it. It’s sort of like a Ouija board, where everyone’s hands are on this board. It’s like all your hands are on the drawing simultaneously.”

Perhaps the experience will make the post-lockdown world a better place.

“My hope,” Hough says, “is that live music will be cherished as never before. When we sit as part of an audience in a hall, something forbidden now, there is both the richest possible musical experience along with a profound human connection, which cannot be replicated.”

Eliasson agrees, adding that there will be a deep moral change for the better. “I — like many others — have had the chance to slow down and look inward, to spend time questioning and consolidating my thinking around what art is and what it can do.

“The focus on empathy and care, on being present to one’s family and friends, neighbours and fellow citizens, that we are experiencing will stay with us, I think, and affect how art is made and shared. The cynicism and egoism that you also find in culture and in the art world are hopefully becoming less apparent.”

Craig-Martin believes we may have been taught humility. “We have realised there are people who are willing to sacrifice their lives to save us; people we don’t know are prepared to do that. These are very amazing things to learn. And I think that, when things start to go back, it’ll never go back to what it was.”

For architects and designers, the post-lockdown problem is more complex. They have to make art in which we will live, work or meet. Heatherwick feels this profoundly.

“I think we may get more clarity on the quality of space. That if you’re bothering to be together, then make it really meaningful. Or don’t bother and be at home. And I think home will become more meaningful too. I’m more confident than ever that there will be more need for really powerful, meaningful place-making that brings people together. And that maybe some of the cynical kind of crappy half-hearted modes and models that could be got away with in the past maybe won’t be able to be got away with.”

Face-to-face interaction may continue to be rationed, but, if so, it must be made as meaningful as possible. Catastrophe has not always produced such positive thinking from artists and thinkers. Lord Byron wrote his most apocalyptic poem, Darkness, when summer skies were darkened by the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia. He concluded that darkness was the fundamental condition of all things: “She was the Universe.”

The catastrophic earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 shook the faith of the great Enlightenment philosophers. The fact that the ground shook so violently deprived them of a metaphor for the basis of their our thought — that it was “grounded”. Reason had its limits, it could not stop the ground shaking.

Finally, contemplating the supreme catastrophe of the Holocaust, the German philosopher Theodor Adorno said it was “barbaric” to write poetry after Auschwitz.

They all had a point, but perhaps they were overreacting. They should have looked back to the 15th century, when the greatest flowering of art emerged from the horrors of the Black Death. Human life, experience and society may be changed irrevocably by disasters, but what endures, unchanged, is the need to turn it all into beauty.