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Barcelona. Lockdown day 16

*This is an informal text written some days into the coronavirus lockdown, and intended as a portrait of a possibly temporary state of mind. I've tried for the most part to write it in one sitting, avoiding looking for supporting quotes and references. It is what it is.*

## Where Now For The Apocalypse Artists?

Where now for the apocalypse artists in this strangest and most uncertain of times? We'll take as an example an artist who's work has been increasingly focussed on post-human, post-terrestrial futures. A quasi melancholic absence of the human against a backdrop of the sublime and impassive universe. Over the last 2 or 3 years this body of work has intensified with the development of a series called of small post-apocalyptic dioramas and an evolving new direction expanding on that format. Meanwhile the artist has also been developing a long term project as artist in residence with the ICCUB (Institute of Cosmic Science at the University of Barcelona) that deals with the end of the Universe, the ultimate apocalypse. This takes place in 3 stages, with the end of the Solar System, the end of the Galaxy and the end of the Universe. Additionally a new collaborative project was initiated which examined new personal, political and phenomenological angles around terrestrial asteroid impacts. Joyful stuff all round.

It's a fun artist's game to play, weaving together the narratives and meta-narratives and cultural noise about armageddon, about things coming to and end, and about our human sense of permanence being a particularly deceitful notion. For a white, male, European artist its easy to take an objective standpoint on risk and loss, survival and catastrophe. Against a background of urgent but still abstractly distantly unfolding climate crisis news it is no great leap to extrapolate out into its extremes, weaving ubiquitous fictions with abstractions and simulations. Embracing an interest in astrophysics and exoplanets allows for a rich contextualising process where the vast, neutral and inhuman universe informs us of a plethora of alternative planetary conditions. If we want to imagine an Earth become inhabitable for humans we can just look at Venus or any number of newly discovered exoplanets. Oh, the preciousness and fragility of life, and what callous treatments we can give it from within the safe and isolating walls of the studio... with the headphones on and a coffee and sandwich waiting. Meanwhile, just fuck up this building a little more, tear down the twisted wire trees and add some debris around this drowned bus.

To be fair, the ease with which one can distance oneself from the dread being recreated in plaster and polystyrene and paint, was always one of the subtexts of the work. The self-reflective fetishism a crucial timbre within the orchestration. The self-flagellation maybe more clumsily ironic. More of that later.

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly the artist is unable to go to the studio to work on these projects anymore, or have meetings with the ICCUB, or travel to Helsinki to collaborate. In fact, he can barely leave the house. A third of the world's population is subject to some form of lockdown (at the time of writing, and sure to rise further). The apocalypse through superbug is making an unexpected and pretty effective play for major event of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far, leaving the climate crisis red-faced and struggling for air in its wake. The truth is that coronavirus and COVID-19 are much more effective agents of apocalypse than climate change. Climate change made us feel guilty for taking that flight, or made us worry about the value of the seafront second

property, but life really wasn't changing very much and we were pretty much free to get on with it (with the virtue signalling of how bad we felt about it that we could share over beers). Coronavirus is really right up in our faces (and all over our hands). We can watch the death count in real time, we can hear horrifying stories from health professionals on the front line, we are all affected by it. Even as recently as the end of February it would have seemed utterly crazy to imagine saying this... but... the world is actually shutting down. Shadows and bogeymen are sidling out from the shadows. The middle-class apocalypse of an enforced work-from-home-cum-Netflix-binge-yoga-holiday mutates into an oh-shit-the-world-will-never-be-the-same-again anxiety. The fortunate ones trade Facebook posts and tweets and send virtual hugs to ease their enforced social/physical distancing pain. The not so lucky, the precarious, the toxic/abusive relationships, the gig economy workers, the homeless, the mentally ill, and so on and so on and so on, are genuinely having a truly terrible time. And it hasn't even kicked in throughout the developing world yet, and we're struggling to grasp just how long it is going to be before we even begin to approach normality again. How can climate change compete with this thing that everyone is actually living all of a sudden? Papers and articles are emerging that outline how the degradation of our natural environment is precisely why we have what may only be the first of many pandemics, but even that feels too complex for now.

An outpouring of online content from virtual museum visits, streaming opera, computer courses in just about everything creative remind us that culture is still a big market, even if we can't go out and see it or touch it. Thinkers and writers and theorists of all stripes are also pouring out their thoughts and writings and theories about what this means, how we should cope with it, and where it all might be going and what it might mean for near future society. Its getting close to saturation already (and yes, here is some more). Its positive and constructive to engage with uncertainty, and to begin to loosely strategise, to think what culture might be, and be for, when we emerge into whatever new world awaits us. Of course, the 'system' is resilient. It might not know exactly and explicitly what its doing but it will go all out to look after itself and its interests. The supposition is that everything will eventually slide back to something we had only a couple of months ago. Maybe a bit wiser and more wary, but pretty much the same. However, this is also the perfect time, while everything is destabilised, to get our cultural apparatus into and under and around all the wobbly bits and try to tip the whole thing over once and for all. Would it be possible to find a consensus on how to do that, or will there just be a new favour of free-for-all.

An enforced work-from-home for artists is requiring a repositioning on many levels. Cut off from their usual tools and workspaces, many are looking at news ways of getting their content out. Expect to see a boom in online tools, online video, online texts, online music and sound art, online conferences. The servers will emit more CO2 than your average cruise liner. But still there must be a striving to keep culture relevant and furthermore emphasise its importance as an expression of humanity and a connecting thread for our thoughts and reactions to the messiness and challenges of whatever this thing we live in actually is. It would be interesting to see strategies and experiments for art at a distance that is not online. Like an ad-hoc network than dovetails with other ad-hoc networks. Hubs and nodes of expression that link and spread out from source. Content that disseminates through the physical world, if you'll excuse me, virally not virtually.

Where does all this leave an artist already invested in working on post-apocalyptic scenarios? Do we actually need meta-narrative laden post-apocalyptic art right now? Is the fetishism of catastrophe and survival and ultimate endings in any way, shape or form contributing to healing or stimulating a hurting humanity right now? Does it need to?

There will come a time when humans will live out the unimaginably difficult last days on Earth. The Solar System dictates that this will be in around 500,000 or 600,000 years. The anthropogenic climate crisis more than likely cuts a significant number off that total. Maybe those humans are actually us right now.

In the world of study of existential threats (nothing to do with Sartre or Camus, lots to do with threats to existence) there are few more compelling or informed voices than that of Nick Bostrom from the Future Humanity Institute and the University of Oxford. In his 2001 text 'Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards' he classifies all the various ways in which we could see our end as Bangs, Crunches, Shrieks and Whimpers. The events within these categories range from nuclear holocaust to asteroid impacts to the ending of the simulation. Extinction via pandemic features in the first

section, Bangs; whereby “Earth-originating intelligent life goes extinct in relatively sudden disaster resulting from either an accident or a deliberate act of destruction”. Its surprising and sobering how many alternative scenarios there are. A sense of permanence on inhaling becomes a fraught sense of fragility while slowly exhaling. The icy claws tightening around the middle vertebrae.

We've delighted in role playing extinction and end-of-civilisation scenarios since the post war years. From the early 50s to the late 80s the ubiquitous narrative was nuclear annihilation; *Threads*, *The Day After*, *Dr Strangelove* and so on. Skirting carefully around the alien invasion and zombie narratives we come to the natural apocalypse scenarios of *San Andreas* or *2012* or *The Road*. The pandemic movies are suddenly very popular again. Discussion and viewings of *Contagion*, *Outbreak* and *The Andromeda Strain* have spiked. The board game *Pandemic* is being dusted off in homes around the world and the mobile game *Plague Inc* has released an update that allows you to fight a pandemic, not just try to kill off humanity by being one. Preppers are beginning to be taken seriously. Artists such as Goya, the Chapman Brothers and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster have explored the aesthetics and darker themes of apocalypse and disaster.

It seems as clear as ever that apocalypse and disaster fetishism are a fascination for a great many people, a continuation of our thirst for horror movies and scary rides. But more of an experiential, slowly unfolding horror than the adrenaline rush. Psychological studies have suggested that fear is the most triggering and intense emotion for people, and this explains the thirst for horror. Some suggest that the same applies when we watch humanity fight for survival, triggering the emotions connected to a primal need to survive. The excitation-transfer theory describes how such cinematic and literary experiences allow us something of the experience of existential threats while our brains give us the soothing hits of dopamine from the safety we feel at the same time. There is also the thrill of the new. Seeing the so familiar world in new ways; submerged skyscrapers, burning cities, undead brain-eating hordes in the supermarket, the rule of law discarded in an instant. Within this fantasy framework it is easy to identify as the heroic survivor and to imagine ourselves in that position. We'd all be a Rick Grimes or a Sarah Connor. Maybe at worst we'd even be the desperate shuffling father in *The Road*, full of pragmatic caring and survival instinct even under the worst circumstances.

It was darkly hilarious that as the coronavirus crisis bites ever harder into global communities, one of the main UK TV channels decided to screen *Contagion*. Was this previous programming that hadn't been changed, or did someone actually believe that this was what people wanted to see? While official viewing figures were around 800,000 public reaction ranged from outrage and incredulosity to a frank assessment that amongst pandemic documentaries this was indeed what we should be watching.

While the populace is unable to visit galleries, museums, concerts and poetry readings a huge amount of content is, as imagined, being moved online. Virtual gallery tours and streamed literature is all well and good, but the value of the in-your-face experience of live culture in whatever form cannot be understated. So many of the practitioners of the challenging, thought provoking avant-garde art forms that are so important right now might not make it out of the other side of this. The way culture is valued and structured in most of the world places these artists in a precarious position in the best of times. Right now many are struggling to survive but even so are still looking for ways that we can apply the necessary ideas and constructs to the weirding situation we are in, and will continue to be in even once lockdowns are over. We will have to wait and see what appetite, if any, there is for complex and difficult messages in the near to middle future. There is a chance that society will crave the soothing and optimistic art, or even the starkly banal, that will heal wounds and nurture hope and healing. There is an equal chance that this will not even be possible. Hopefully we can avoid the tendency that art has to be repositioned as a vehicle of hope and solutions. Milton Friedman said: 'Only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around'. But what will become of the apocalyptic artists? This is probably not the actual apocalypse, but we are certainly seeing some of the signs and symptoms that an apocalypse will probably entail. The apocalypse artists should be paying very close attention to that and they should be building these subtleties and complexities into the clumsiness of their fantasy based apocalypse art.

The artist Oron Catts talks about the social contract that artists have with society, how there are certain

expectations and how this is a contract that nobody has ever signed. Artists aren't honour bound to tell the truth and neither should they rise to the expectations of a society. According to Oron "we ought to provoke, question and reveal hypocrisies, through different tactics: whether aesthetic, absurd/irony or subtle confrontation". I'm not sure an apocalyptic artist is questioning and revealing hypocrisies per se, but maybe they are holding up that mirror that reflects our emotional investment in things going to shit. Revelling in horror while not living in horror is a particularly privileged pastime... so maybe that is one hypocrisy that the apocalyptic artist is questioning. What would be the reaction to the Chapman brothers exhibiting Hell in Syria? All of a sudden, while being nowhere near the level of the war ravaged nations, many of us are living a horror and facing a very different life afterwards, both on a practical and psychological basis. While many feel they are being stalked by death, and a great many actually are, the majority of us also fear a reduced totalitarian society in the coming years. Whatever happens, over the coming months and years something vaguely recognisable as normality will return and people will strive to return to deeply ingrained habits. The response to apocalyptic art in those times will likely be heightened, our sensibilities rubbed more raw. A reaction of disgust could be envisaged just as easily as one of recognition, of 'oh... we very nearly saw that'. The dialogue and discussion around such themes will surely be more enhanced and more nuanced... more informed. The apocalyptic artists will carry on.

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