

Art as essential activity: an inquiry

From now and ongoing

Curated by Biljana Ciric



Jasphy Zheng, *Stories from the Room* 2020 (detail), Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Ken'ichi Miura

From the depths of Melbourne's COVID-19 Stage 4 lockdown, TarraWarra Museum of Art has commissioned a new series of artistic inquiries that will explore the role of art in a global pandemic. The series, titled *Art as essential activity: an inquiry*, is conceived of and curated by Melbourne-based independent curator Biljana Ciric.

The first project in the series will be NY/China-based Chinese-American artist **Jasphy Zheng** with ***Stories from the Room***, a participatory work that collects personal writings about the shared experience of living through the COVID-19 pandemic. The artist now invites anyone to permanently contribute their reflections, journals, or memos to help build a living archive that documents this unique moment in history. Earlier this year, *Stories from the Room* was staged at the Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan, where it received submissions from people living through the pandemic from across Japan and further afield, including Wuhan, China, and the USA.

Once lockdown is lifted, this archive will be assembled for public viewing at TarraWarra Museum of Art, in a COVID-safe manner, as a monument to the contributors' stories and voices.

Curator Biljana Ciric says the pandemic has shown we need to develop new modes of connection and exploration. As we have discovered, the internet will never be a substitute for a physical encounter because physicality is crucial for our wellbeing.

"*Art as essential activity: an inquiry* will look at new ways to practice international collaboration in this time of limited mobility. Some of the questions we are posing include: What is the role of art in

times of a global pandemic? Can art be considered as an essential service and, if so, how can institutions perform that essential service? Can they be used in the cause of emotional health and how?

"Given our current restricted living conditions, can art institutions provide an experience more valuable than an individual work of art? How do we conceive of the physical presence of museums and galleries in these times, without turning them into a hyper-sanitised space?

"In a gesture of solidarity, artists have been invited to contribute to **Art as essential activity** by thinking about our common future and ways of co-existing with the coronavirus.

"Through new modes of encounter and connectivity in a time of closed borders, the project seeks to generate a renewed feeling of solidarity amongst the international community. Underlying this approach is a spirit of generosity, of not being afraid to learn from each other, and a willingness to allow for cracks to open wider and expose certain failures.

"In showing their vulnerability in this time of immense uncertainty and turmoil, and by creating a space for openness in a period of great restriction and poor access, each of the artists will prompt us to consider a new role for art as a form of radical care," Ms Ciric said.

Victoria Lynn, Director of TarraWarra Museum of Art said, "We are thrilled to be working with Biljana Ciric, whose project will demonstrate ways of working outside of the conventional rhythms of a museum, and how to sustain international collegiality at a time of immobility. Rather than strictly being digital presentations, this series will create artistic actions within the Museum in spite of, and in response to, lockdown."

Zheng says, "In my ongoing long-term project *Stories from the Room*, I wish to stimulate a physical gathering by collecting parallel realities from participants and displaying them at TarraWarra Museum of Art. Through a collective act, a sense of emotional connection is generated, in the form of a community, regardless of distance."

To participate in *Stories from the Room*, simply:

- Document your reflections on living through the COVID-19 pandemic through letters, emails, personal writing, journals or memos, at any length and in any language you prefer
- Write as often as you wish; multiple submissions over time are welcome and each contributor will have a dedicated folder in the archive
- Send your writings to storiesfromtheroom@twma.com.au or by post to Stories from the Room, c/- TarraWarra Museum of Art, PO Box 310, Healesville VIC 3777, Australia.

Please ensure your communication is dated, with your name and location only. Do not include any private details (such as street address, telephone or email) in the letter, which may be exhibited at the Museum. Anonymous quotes may be published online or used for promotional purposes. All received writing will be saved in an archive as physical copies, and each contributor will have a dedicated folder for recurring contributions. Submissions will not be returned to the sender, and will remain as part of the artwork. Submissions are welcome at any time – there is no closing date for this open call.

Further **Art as essential activity** actions will be announced soon.

ENDS

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BILJANA CIRIC BIOGRAPHY:

Biljana Ciric is an independent curator currently based in Melbourne. She was the co-curator of the *3rd Ural Industrial Biennale for Contemporary Art* (Yekaterinburg, 2015), curator-in-residency at Kadist Art Foundation (Paris, 2015), and a research fellow at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Høvikodden, 2016). Her recent exhibitions include *An Inquiry: Modes of Encounter* presented by Times Museum, Guang Zhou (2019); *When the Other Meets the Other Other* presented by Cultural Center Belgrade (2017); *Proposals for Surrender* presented by McAM in Shanghai (2016/2017); and *This exhibition Will Tell You Everything About FY Art Foundations* in FY Art Foundation space in Shen Zhen (2017).

Other exhibitions include *Just as Money is the Paper, the Gallery is the Room* (2014) presented by Osage Art Foundation (Hong Kong); *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back—Us and Institution, Us as Institution* (2013) presented by Times Guangzhou Museum (Guangzhou); *Tino Sehgal Solo Exhibition* (2013) in UCCA (Beijing); *Alternatives to Ritual* (2012–13) in Goethe Open Space (Shanghai) and OCAT (Shenzhen); *Taking the Stage OVER* (2011–12) presented in different institutions in Shanghai; and *Institution for the Future - Asia Triennale* (2011) in Manchester, among others.

In 2013, Ciric initiated the seminar platform *From a History of Exhibitions Towards a Future of Exhibition Making* with a focus on China and Southeast Asia. The assembly platform was hosted by St Paul St Gallery, AUT, New Zealand (2013), Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2018), and Times Museum, Guang Zhou (2019). The book with the same name was published by Sternberg Press in 2019. Other publications include *History in Making; Shanghai: 1979–2006* published by CFCCA; and *Life and Deaths of Institutional Critique*, co-edited by Nikita Yingqian Cai and published by Black Dog Publishing, among others.

In 2018 she established the educational platform *What Could/Should Curating Do?* She was nominated for the ICI Independent Vision Curatorial Award (2012). Currently she is developing a long-term project reflecting on China's Belt and Road Initiative titled *As you go . . . the roads under your feet, towards a new future*. She is undertaking a practice-based PhD in Curatorial Practice at Monash University, Melbourne.

JASPHY ZHENG BIOGRAPHY:

Living between the US and China, Jasphy Zheng is an interdisciplinary artist whose recent practice explores the inevitable failure of communication at interpersonal and collective levels. With social installations, unannounced performance, sculptural objects, and artist's books, Zheng constructs situations as public interventions that aim to raise awareness of our social and cultural environment in and out of the context of contemporary art.

Zheng earned a BFA with honors from Rhode Island School of Design. A recent solo show was held at the Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu in Japan. Other 2019 exhibitions include *Floating*, AC

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Gallery, 798 Art District, Beijing; *Abnormal Prediction of Hourglass*, Advance Art Museum, Changsha; and *Love Letter NO.4*, DePot, Shanghai.



Jasphy Zheng, *Stories from the Room 2020* (detail), Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Ken'ichi Miura

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