

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Keep Your Distance: Covid-19 Creativity or Collapse

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It is standard practice to begin academic articles by problematising a question. What, exactly, do we mean by the term 'creativity'? To what, precisely, does the word 'collapse' refer? Mindful of the editorial limitations placed on this submission, that it should be no more than 1000 words in length, let us assume, for the sake of a very unacademic argument, that we know what we mean when we use these terms. Creativity, in all its various manifestations, is generally regarded as something positive; something to be nurtured and encouraged. 'Collapse', on the other hand, tends to be perceived negatively; as something destructive and best avoided. However, when I think about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on my life, and the lives of those with whom I'm familiar, I find this binary distinction unhelpful.

We turn to and engage with the arts, as makers and/or consumers, for many different reasons; for comfort and distraction, for pleasure, insight or understanding, as well as a means of connecting with others. The national 'lockdown' introduced in March 2020 to help limit the spread and impact of the Covid-19 virus reaffirmed the view many of us hold, that despite so often being perceived as elitist, the arts (and crafts) are essential for our health and wellbeing. As the world around us shut down, and we endeavoured to keep safe by keeping our distance, something very interesting began to happen. In a bid to stave off our fear and increasing sense of disconnection we got creative; and we seemingly did so in large numbers.

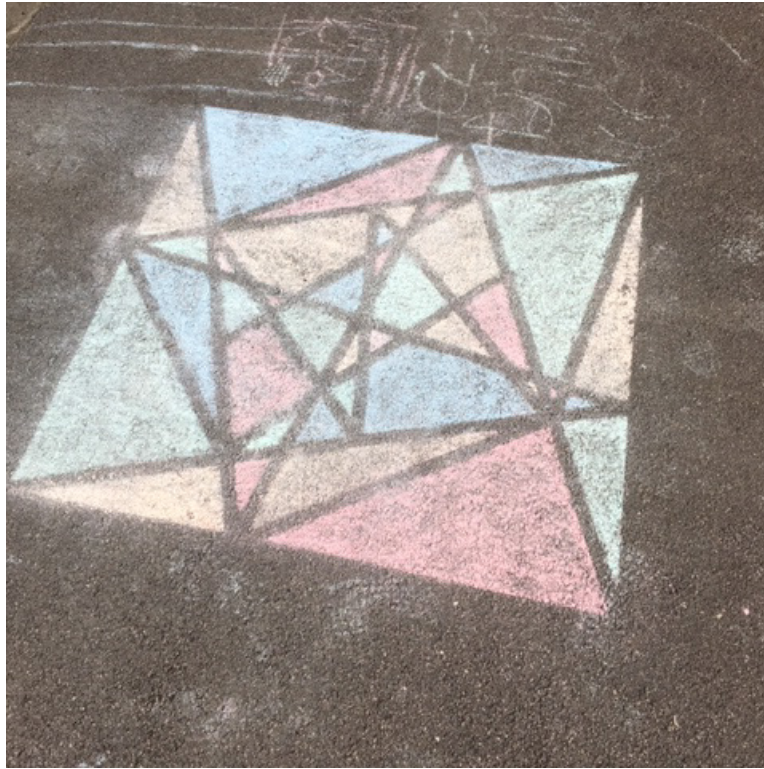


Fig. 1

Hobbycraft – a major UK supplier of arts and craft materials – for example, reported an increase in like-for-like sales in excess of 200 per cent during the lockdown ¹ Simultaneously, major art galleries and museums across the globe reported a surge in the numbers of people accessing their collections online. In the early weeks of the lockdown, the National Gallery’s Virtual Tour pages reported a staggering 1144% year-on-year increase in traffic ². If we couldn’t go to work or visit friends and family, we could at least watch Grayson’s Art Club, tend our gardens, build model aircraft, learn how to paint or sew, produce amusing videos and/or decorate our windows with rainbows and uplifting messages for key workers and NHS staff ³. Evidence of our creative endeavours could be seen everywhere, from the children’s drawings found on walls and pavements to the photographs of our latest bake posted online. If demonstrating our creative skills and output wasn’t exactly compulsory, it was certainly *de rigueur*.



Figs. 2



Figs. 3



Figs.4

Meanwhile, an altogether different story was unfolding. As social isolation, psychological distress and the death toll increased, and the economy collapsed, the nation's cultural life was placed on hold. Events were postponed or cancelled, while libraries, museums, art galleries, theatres and cinemas closed, some never to reopen. Thousands of staff hitherto employed in the creative industries lost their jobs. Almost overnight, the very things that helped sustain us, that give our lives meaning and a sense purpose, suddenly stopped or were rendered inaccessible. The personal and collective consequences of these traumatic events and losses are incalculable and likely to result in long term changes in the way we think about, engage with and consume culture.

Ironically, the Covid-19 pandemic had little immediate impact on my own life. Living as I do in a city, the initial absence of traffic, and the consequent reduction in noise and air pollution, might arguably be said to have improved it. Moreover, being of a pensionable age, and mostly retired from therapeutic work, there was no sudden loss of employment or income to be accommodated. Although I missed being able to see my extended family or visit art galleries and my local library, I had an established daily routine to sustain me. Suddenly, I had even more time and fewer distractions than usual to read, write and develop my own art practice. I was also, mercifully, also spared the illness itself; as were most of my family and friends.

Before long, however, the existential threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic became ever more apparent. Daily life felt increasingly bewildering, frustrating and scary. Why, I asked, (along with many, many others) are so many people dying? The restrictions imposed by the lockdown shrank and impoverished my inner and outer worlds with alarming speed. When not experienced as simply overwhelming, everyday life assumed the character of some bizarre endurance test.

Throughout this time, but particularly during the early period of the lockdown, my state of mind has oscillated between bursts of creative activity and episodes of listlessness and dissatisfaction. After an extended period of trial and error, I began to experiment with the idea of keeping a visual journal employing a grid format; a format that I had often used in the past when exploring graphically the conflict between order and chaos.

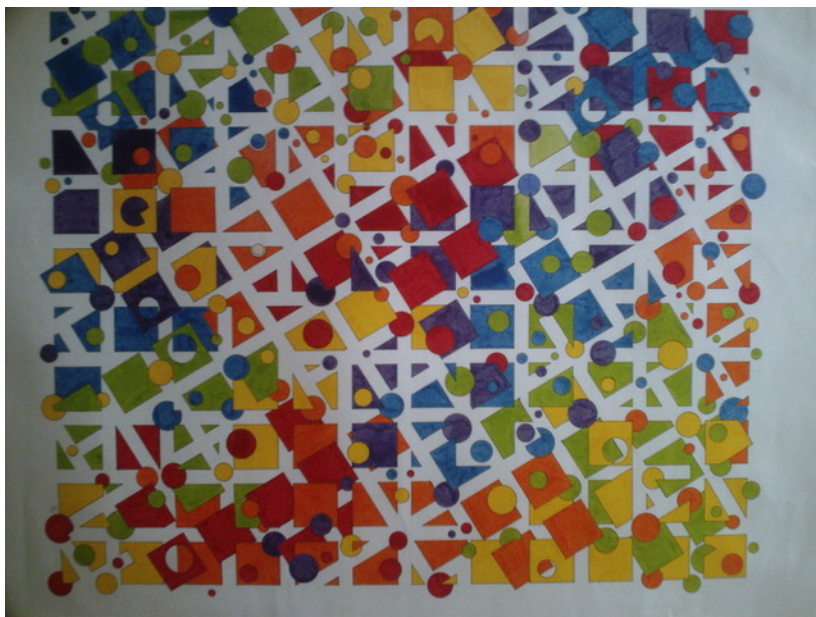


Fig. 5

Each day I set myself the task of selecting a minimum of four images that represent something of significance that had occurred in my inner world (a memory, perhaps) or a scene I had observed and recorded, frequently during long walks I had started taking.



Insert Fig. 6 here

About the Author

David Edwards trained as an art therapist at Goldsmiths College, graduating in 1982. Since qualifying, he worked in a range of clinical and educational settings; mainly with adults. His book 'Art Therapy' was first published by Sage in 2004. A second edition was published in 2013. David retired from clinical work at the end of 2020 and currently divides his time - lockdown restrictions permitting - between Sheffield and North Shields.

Footnotes

¹ <https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/markets/article-8585847/Hobbycraft-triple-sales-coronavirus-lockdown.html> [accessed 26/10/20]

² <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/features/our-doors-may-be-closedbut-we-are-still-there-for-our-visitors/> [accessed 26/10/20]

³ <https://www.channel4.com/press/news/graysons-art-clubE> [accessed 26/10/20]