


OVERCONSUMPTION

MAKE PUBLIC ART NOT WASTE



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

MAKE PUBLIC ART NOT WASTE



How public art challenges
over-consumption, creates
community and making it is
more fun than shopping



From decorated stones left in public parks, to chalked pavements and doorstep theatre, making public art flourished during the pandemic. But it was much more than just a creative way to fill time for populations in lockdown. It demonstrated that the benefits to human well being of making art can be more widely enjoyed, brought communities together, and democratised an activity that can be a powerful alternative to consumerism. More widely, it is now being taken up and used directly to challenge the overconsumption behind the climate crisis.

Children were particularly affected by the stay-at-home rules during the pandemic, and even by the restrictions of class bubbles for those able to finally return to school. In Portland, Oregon, using **chalks on the pavement**¹ was one low-tech idea that made art accessible for everyone. One Canadian teenager made a **new drawing**² on her driveway each day for 100 days to cheer up her younger brother, while “**active sidewalks**”³ became a way of encouraging safe outside play in a post-covid world for children who had become fearful of interactive play.



Leading artists like the UK's Grayson Perry and Antony Gormley created initiatives to democratise art making and encourage the wider public to make their own, breaking down barriers that can otherwise make art seem like something only for elite professionals. The results, for example, in Grayson Perry's **Art Club**⁴ on television was inspirational, entertaining and transformative, giving thousands effective permission to find satisfaction and meaning in a creative activity. Antony Gormley's **The Great Big Art Exhibition**⁵ emboldened people to turn their windows and gardens into galleries to turn neighbourhoods into open galleries during lockdowns.



Public expression also flowed in gratitude toward those serving on the frontlines of healthcare and service supply, bringing a welcome focus to people in jobs that are rarely lauded, including car workers and supermarket delivery drivers. One exhibition in the UK entitled **Gratitude**⁶ comprised 51 sculptures created by a number of artists and accompanied by real-life audio stories, recorded by famous voices, about key workers. A US primary school was just one of many making and **displaying posters**⁷ of thankfulness in their windows and outside their homes. In the UK, a huge wave of **rainbow pictures**⁸ done by children appeared in almost every roadside window as a symbol for compassion and connection in a time of isolation. Parents began to task their children with spotting the rainbows while out on daily walks, sparking the Twitter hashtag #ChaseTheRainbow.

Some unusual public spaces became fair game as people used their creativity to cheer others up, to comment on social issues or to simply have shared fun. One Chicago artist made **local potholes**⁹ into works of art with mosaic. Many street artists used the **ubiquitous facemask**¹⁰ as a way of poking fun at people in power, while also reminding the public that artists – many of whom were struggling to survive without support or art galleries and museums being open – were still alive and kicking.

Art institutions around the world not only reeled from the lack of income from visitors; they also saw their funding continue to be cut. Most of Australia's national collecting institutions, for example, will see funding drop by between **4% and 21%**¹¹ over the next five years. Calls have been made for more **investment in public art**¹², similar in scale to US president Franklin D Roosevelt's Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and Works Progress Administration (WPA), **set up during the Great Depression in the 1930s**.¹³ Theatre is one genre that has struggled during the pandemic, especially against the well-funded and convenient home-viewing platforms like Disney and Netflix. Commentator **Naomi Klein**¹⁴ points to this as part of a dangerous future of isolation and artificial intelligence-controlled experiences. In this context, some argue that going to a live performance becomes a political statement in itself and will become increasingly important.



One aspect of theatre is that it brings people together to explore and entertain through stories – importantly it is a public space, and a partially anonymous one, where you can let go of your own identity for a while and imagine others. Participation in the arts enlarges the imagination, and rehearses different ways of being, allowing us to countenance change, or reframe our experiences, equipping us better for change. In other words, it rehearses imaginative capacities that we will radically need in the coming times – and importantly, it reminds us we are not alone.

Zoe Svendsen, Director, Metis



Historically, **public art**¹⁶ has been **created for specific spaces**¹⁷ in an organised way, but much of the **creative response**¹⁸ that emerged during the pandemic has been more spontaneous and organic. Some art institutions have also shifted in response to having to close their premises to the public by **moving online**¹⁹ and increasing the accessibility of their exhibitions in a way that is expected to continue long after the pandemic has ended. Even China's **Forbidden City museum**²⁰ opened its online doors to the public enabling many to see a place that might never be able to visit in person. Many institutions also responded to the public's takeover of creativity and its demand that they connect better with more diverse communities, by prioritising co-creation and collaboration, by showcasing **more street art**²¹ and **encouraging art as protest**.²² But most of the real creativity that has blown open the idea of public space has not come from our august institutions but from ordinary people.

The pandemic reminded people of the importance of community – both locally where neighbours responded to the need to help each other – and globally where our shared humanity and vulnerability became painfully obvious thanks to a virus. People across the world also turned to public art and creativity, using their bodies, imaginations and voices to bring shared hopes and fears to the attention of others in their community. Public art and expression is important because it brings live issues into our everyday spaces and forms a key role in a flourishing and sustainable society by revealing our evolving culture. This is also part of reimagining our streets, as shopping habits change and **high streets**¹⁵ potentially become places for socialising and participating in community activity.

The pandemic coincided with a huge uprising in anti-racist activities online and in person, and this particular form of public expression frequently clashed with historic public art and statues in particular. Wikipedia has a **whole page**²³ dedicated to statues removed during the George Floyd protests, showing the extent to which people's anger about racism expressed itself in the downing of statues of slave traders and others who benefitted from the trade and from colonialism.



One of the most visible forms of public expression in the last few years has been public protest by groups such as **Fridays for Future**,²⁴ **Extinction Rebellion**,²⁵ **Black Lives Matter**²⁶ and **Culture Declares Emergency**.²⁷ People have taken to the streets to show their anger at the failings of governments over climate change, racism, inequalities and ecological disaster. **Young people**²⁸ have responded particularly strongly to the call to protest with **vibrant and effective homemade signs**,²⁹ art as protest and **imaginative ways**³⁰ of getting the attention of the adult world. Making a homemade sign has become cool again, and the use of visual expression to draw attention to social issues has become mainstream. **Extinction Rebellion**³¹ in particular is known for its use of **cleverly designed artwork**³² made specifically for letting loose into the public arena. Protesters are encouraged to adapt and share, bringing their own expression to the combined effort. As a result, its flags and banners have flourished into an impressive body of work, including **vast silk flags**³³ co-created under artist Otavio Avancini and **giant pink structures**³⁴ that also act as road-blockers.

Craftivism³⁵ has also stimulated a rebirth in the once popular idea of embroidery messaging, hand-stitched banners and quilts with embedded meaning. A recent **exhibition of quilters**³⁶ co-creating work on the theme of the UK's National Health Service (NHS) brought radical ideas into local churches and community centres using traditional craft. **Stitches for Survival**³⁷ made 1.5km of handmade stitched work to display at the COP 26 in Glasgow as a reminder of the 1.5 degrees of warming we are trying to stay within, with the final work displayed in a public park.

The pandemic has helped us to view our public spaces differently – perhaps less as places to simply shop, or walk through on the way to somewhere else, and more as destinations in themselves. Places where we meet friends and family, enjoy nature and the outdoors, watch and participate in music, theatre, art, dance, and perhaps join others in giving expression to our beliefs. As tech encourages us to stay at home and have everything our hearts desire delivered by a drone, the real world offers diversity, difference, sensations, experience as yet unparalleled by virtual reality. It's time now to get out there and participate.



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