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Ways of Perceiving- The Curation of an Imagined Exhibition

ANTI-VAXX

ANTI-VAXX is a controversial exhibition curated with the intent of questioning people's empathy. The idea for this exhibition was initiated in January 2020, and the events of 2020 thus far have only strengthened its necessity in our Covid-19 stricken society.

The UK is officially no longer a measles-free country purely because of the amount of parents refusing their children MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccinations, and as of March 2019, NHS digital revealed an overwhelming amount of people have lost confidence in many vaccinations in general (Boseley, 2020) and this issue has to be confronted.

In order to look to the future, we must learn from the past. People inevitably misunderstand the present when they live in ignorance of the past. (Keane, 2010)

The curation will be a collection of artworks that were created during infamous pandemics such as The Spanish Flu (1918) and the Black Death (14th Century) as well as the HIV/AIDS crisis of the late 1980's.

We have never had access to as much free knowledge as we have now, yet people are seeking their own truths. As Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan acknowledged in his book *Landscapes of fear-*

"In a sense, every human construction, whether mental or material, is a component in a landscape of fear because it exists in constant chaos. Thus children's fairy tales as well as

adult's legends, cosmological myths, and indeed philosophical systems are shelters built by the mind in which human beings can rest, at least temporarily, from the siege of inchoate experience and of doubt.” (Yi-Fu Tuan, p. 127)

If some members of the British public are creating their own reality surrounding a rumour that autism is the result of vaccinations, what can we do to make them acknowledge the privilege that they are overlooking? The concept itself creates a safety net in which the fear of a child having autism (which is a random occurrence and far from a new condition, but often discussed in the media as a condition of increasing prominence in our young population) can be absolved by the parent not vaccinating its child. If it was to vaccinate its child and the child was to have autism, they feel responsible (J. Lawrence, 2004)

Firstly, the exhibition needs a space. The most important factor is that it must not be comfortable or predictable, there will be no order to the exhibits. They will exist, all together, in shared spaces, sporadically around an empty warehouse with immense amounts of open space in between. Tuan speaks of the concept of place in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*-

“It is essentially a static concept. If we see the world as a process, constantly changing, we should not be able to develop any sense of place. Movement in space can be in one direction or circular, implying repetition. A common symbol for time is the arrow; others are the circular orbit and the swinging pendulum. Thus images of space and time merge. The arrow represents directional time but also movement in space to a goal. Goal is both a point in time and a point in space.” (p.179)

We have learned from the covid-19 outbreak that the world is not a predictable place, with a solid routine that we can rely on. When our routines are destroyed, all sense of place changes. Our place in the world is not even what it was the day before, our place of work, our places of education and exercise have limited to our one 'safe place' - it has become a space in which we all exist, trying to survive, helping each other in the best way that we can. This is why this exhibition will have no circular contents, it will have no arrow system or direction. You must exist in the space, and survive it.



Figure 1- The Serial Killer Museum, Jesolo, Veneto, Italy (2019)

After analysing this research, it has been decided that the exhibition will take place in an empty warehouse, with no distinct décor or entrance. Just one neon blue sign above the door which says 'ANTI VAXX' so that spectators know what it is. I chose neon blue because

of its reference to death and morgue's. The Serial Killer Museum in Veneto, Italy (fig.1) was also set in a warehouse, and lacked lighting. The sign was graffiti on the wall that looked like blood. The exhibition is incredibly popular for its morbid quality. There will be a severe lack of colour in the exhibition as it is meant to be unpleasant. There will be old strip lighting and a lot of dark corners that contain an empty space.

"Images were first created to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent, gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented; it then showed how somebody had once looked, how the subject had been seen by other people" (Berger 1972)

Why would an image make a difference to an issue like anti- vaccination? Maybe it wouldn't, but it is better to try than to give up. These images will have been made by people at the time of the pandemic. These will not be images made by artists studying history, but by the reporting eye of a sufferer. There are so many pandemics/ epidemics to choose from, but my main concentration will be those that have plagued British society so that a level of empathy can be triggered by all who may view them.

Image Sample 1- No Hope



Figure 2- Untitled (Buffaloes) David Wojnarowicz (1988- 1989)

The First Image sample I am providing is an untitled piece known as Buffaloes by Wojnarowicz, a New York based artist and AIDS sufferer. This photomontage is one of the most powerful pieces I have ever seen. It reports on the absolute helplessness one felt at the time of diagnosis in the HIV/AIDS crisis of the late 1980's. This is how life felt without a cure. When there were no anti-viral medications, before there was hope.

Image Sample 2- Devastation



Figure 3: The Triumph of Death- Pieter Bruegel The Elder (1562)

The second image is the medieval piece 'The Triumph of Death' (fig.3) an oil painting completed by Bruegel in the time of the bubonic plague in Europe. Although there are many plague time pieces to choose from, this painting was the most appropriate in conjunction with the other choices. It reports on the utter devastation that an uncontrolled and what would be in modern times, a preventable bacterial infection, could have in society. We saw

similar results in West Africa during the Ebola Epidemic, and since a vaccination has been found, the infection was controlled and it has become 'old news' (Branswell, 2020) and luckily for us in the developed world, so has the bubonic plague.

Image Sample 3- We Lose Everything.



Fig. 4: Family, Egon Schiele (1918)

The image of Egon Schiele's 'Family' (fig. 4) will take centre stage of the entire exhibition. It is the most important piece to this curation because it both humanised and relevant. When Schiele's pregnant wife died by his side of Spanish flu, whilst he was dying of the same virus,

he painted this heart-breaking image. The image, originally titled squatting couple was changed to include the representation of their unborn child (although he used images of his beloved nephew as a model) knowing that this would be the last and only image of he and his family. He never met his child (Reginer, 2020) If there was an image that break even the steeliest of hearts, surely this would be it.

If our Covid-19 experience has taught us one thing about society, it is that there are three things that really do matter, first of all, health. Second of all, the people around us and thirdly, hope. Without the promise of vaccinations and research we have no hope. History will keep repeating itself, it's nature, but humans have more resources to overcome these tragedies than ever before. The public need to be reintroduced to history, to look at pandemics in a humanistic way, to see what a lack of hope actually felt like, to see society on it's knees, to see young families obliterated, how could anyone say that vaccinations are not essential in our twenty first century culture? With thanks to research HIV is less of a problem than it has ever been since it's appearance in the world, a vaccination looks possible and anti-viral medications are making it possible to live without fear. (WHO, 2020) We must never forget the people who didn't have what we take for granted and we must fight to protect the children having their rights to vaccinations taken away by fear and ignorance.

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