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A Yawn and Three Clicks

Tess Maunder



Image: Michael Pham

The day that it hit me was like any other, whilst on the train home from work. I had been willfully compartmentalising prior to this, blocking out the news, being a resilient rock to those around me whilst also trying to prioritise my own mental well-being. Through this striving to maintain some kind of productive momentum fueled by a cautiously optimistic energy, which I knew was insensitive to the moment but ultimately necessary in order to reach urgent deadlines that were still due despite the pandemic.

During the ride home though, I gave myself permission to slip out of my usual, hard-ass, disciplined self. Allowing myself a small moment to break away, I slowed the hyper-productivity stream of consciousness as I leaned back into my blue carriage seat. I closed my eyes, yawned deeply, and then clicked my fingers in front of my mouth (a habit I learnt from my ex as a method to awake positive energy) as I casually gazed around at those in the carriage near me.

Despite the sparse carriage - with people working from home - there was still ample conversation to overhear.

In front of me, I witnessed a young woman speaking to her mother over the phone; she was hunched over, holding her head, expressing her disbelief at the mass lay-offs that had occurred at her corporate job, and venting about mis-management and internal company politics. Nearby was a group of three food-delivery-app delivery drivers; they were taking their yellow bikes across town, moving closer to a restaurant strip for the hope of finding a higher volume of work. Behind me was a rowdy group of teenagers who seemed to be making some surprisingly compelling arguments for the current state of the world, despite their inebriated state.

This moment of personal reflection was formed in context of proximity to, and an awareness of a sense of collective empathy with other travellers, a moment manifested through the temporal community of the train. A feeling that us curators would always hope to conjure up with our audiences when diligently conceptualising exhibitions, projects, or texts. What I've outlined above is a transition from one psychological state to another. The enabling moment for this being the yawn; and the willingness to step away from a standard flow of consciousness into a temporary community.



Image: Tess Maunder, Melbourne, Australia

After yawning the real depth of the situation hit me, because I could see it on other people's faces, hear it in their voices, see it in their changed stature. I had always known it was there, but as a sensitive person, I wanted to protect myself from the reality. However, rather than leading me to despair, surprisingly there was something unusually generative about working through this in a public space surrounded by company.

A moment of transience bringing us together. I would like to imagine or propose an analogy for these moments of psychological transitions - from one state to another - a yawn as a vessel. What is the purpose of yawning? A yawn is a transition, a preparatory state, preparing us, alerting us, waking us up to look at our present situation with renewed rigor.

“Yawning as a primal form of sociality, yawning may be, at its root, a mechanism of social signalling. When we yawn, we are communicating with one another. We are sending an external sign of something internal, be it our boredom or our anxiety, our fatigue, or our hunger—all moments when we may need a helping hand. In fact, yawning may be the opposite of what we generally think. It's less likely a signal that you're tired than a signal that it's time for everyone around you to act.”¹

Can we imagine our current COVID state as a yawn, preparing us for renewed energy needed to face our collective future with optimism, grace, and integrity?

How do we frame modes of production during collective grief?

I understand that this has been an internationally reaching phenomenon but I can only speak to what I know. What that means for me is to speak from my geo-political position in Melbourne, Australia. In line with this, I will speak to the collective anxiety, grief, and trauma that this pandemic has brought upon us here. Initially, the indicators of the shift were in the government warnings, the unveiling of government policy, daily press conferences, public health announcements in public space. Then came the loss of consumer confidence; with this the cancelling or postponing of large scale events, the firing of precarious workers, displacement of international students. All of this was of course undertaken in context of an industry dependent on such structures that have proven their precarity in the wake of the pandemic.

Initially, there was a false sense of security in Melbourne, that although these temporary measures were being taken, that although life was challenging with social distancing and the fear of contagion, all of this was only temporary and a sense of normality would return soon. However, now writing from the 'second lockdown' in the state of Victoria - it's harder to imagine that. Our second wave has been harder for the public to process. Following the false sense of security, in thinking that we had made it through, there has certainly been a greater sense of community fear, despair, and anxiety. How has this impacted the arts and creative production? I

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/the-surprising-science-of-yawning>

can only again speak to what I am seeing right now; which is being written during the second week of a six-week stage three-state-wide lock-down. How did we get here?



Image: Tess Maunder, Melbourne, Australia

We imagine our reality in context of our contemporary paradigm

1989 is the year that ultimately re-defined the contemporary art industry with a definitive shift towards the warm embrace of globalisation. Think about it - biennales, art fairs, blue-chip global gallery conglomerates, international art residencies, ambitiously scaled collections, travelling consultants, Internet Art (or IDK Post-Internet Art?), Zoom meetings, discourse-led mobility,

international curatorial training courses. Each of these signifiers can be inherently linked to the rise of globalization and its subsequent impact on the industry that we all work within and commit our lives to (let's be real!).

The well traversed trio – 1. the rise in internationally driven markets, 2. the expansion of the middle class, and 3. increased international mobility. Each of these three points has dramatically shifted the way we discuss, consume and formulate our connection to contemporary art. Contemporary art is the love-child of capitalist acceleration, but the art-world's critical mistake is expecting this paradigm to stay consistent and fixed, in a volatile world. With every rise, there is a fall, and perhaps that is what we are collectively facing right now is the dipping of global capitalism.

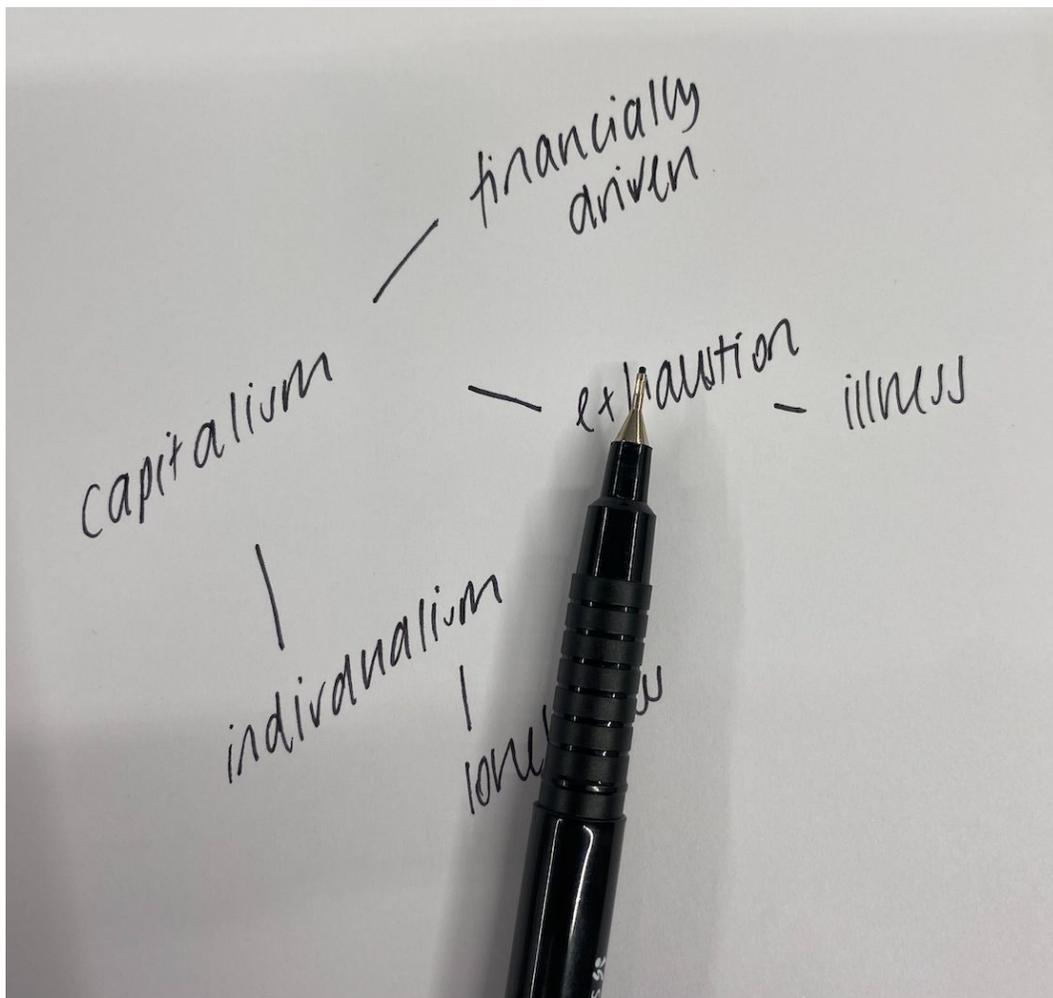
Shifting our gaze to the present, we live right now in the wake of a global industry that has faced a virus providing the impetus for morphing and shifting, which has completely shattered our international way of life. How is the art world responding, what does the world today offer the contemporary art world or vice versa? We need a critical dialogue that is informed, intuitive, and reflective.



Image: Tess Maunder, Melbourne, Australia

We need to re-frame our collective reality with growth, renewal and hope in mind.

Imagining this global moment as a yawn, and opportunity to take a step back from our reality momentarily and to see it renewed. I can only speak to my own personal experience; and a yawn was really needed. The art world has been riding a hamster wheel of production for production's sake – can we all acknowledge the sheer exhaustion of the cyclical nature of the contemporary art industry – and the problematic vectors of labor associated with this. I have realized that I can soften my approach to art and life. Not every intellectual moment happens during a conference. There are moments of encounter in everyday life that inform all of us, to be better people, to continue to inquire, continue to challenge ourselves, continue to take responsibility and to imagine and re-imagine a way of life that is transgressive.



So, this weird time that we are faced with – why not use it to our advantage? Do we really have to produce so much? Can we not use this crazy situation as an opportunity to actually radically re-define what is important to us and why? Let's take a radical step back and ask ourselves,

why are we here? What do we want to do? What do we have to offer now? Who do we want to work with now and why? This is an urgent consideration for all of us.

What we have actually seen in this industry during this time has been incredible insecurity in acknowledging our value in broader society. It's an existential gripe. In the rush and silent pressure to make everything digital, have we forgotten the point of why we are all actually here? I mean what motivates you to work in this industry? I would expect that most of us are not here due to a purely financial impetus. The most beautiful moments of my career are serendipitous moments exchanged between friends, moments of utter unexpected joy, of actual growth and development, a sharing of something intimate and vulnerable.

My proposal is that we consider this period of disruption as a shift in consciousness, and we lean into this challenging and uncomfortable feeling and use it to our collective benefit for growth.

The personal and professional have so much crossover in the art world, let us embrace this reality in a post-COVID context, and enable as many opportunities as possible for radical interpersonal tenderness and vulnerability. Let's use this yawn to regenerate, wake us up, and encourage interpersonal growth, support, and development. Our culture, intelligence, and mental health urgency depends on it.



Image: Tess Maunder, Melbourne, Australia