

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



## 'The Street Outside'

Last year, before 'all this' happened The Common Guild staged 'A Place for the Work and the Human Being', a series of conversations punctuated by artist Rémy Zaugg's 1986 reflections on the places of encounter between artworks and people.

"The relationship between a singular work and a singular beholder is intimate, almost private"<sup>1</sup> wrote Zaugg; but this intimacy is condemned by the rituals of the contemporary art museum to take place in public. This paradox, Zaugg argued, was "up to the architecture of the place and position of the work in the architectural space to resolve."<sup>2</sup>

Taking part in the 10<sup>th</sup> and final discussion of the series last December, the panel consisting of myself, Katrina Brown, Ruth Ewan, Tom Jeffreys and Colm Guo-Lin Peare speculated on the end of the art museum. Its ideology was exhausted: art should take its proper place in the public sphere, accessible to all. The doors of the white cube should be closed forever. I felt some unease about this line of thought. After all, isn't the art museum meant to be, by definition, public in the first place? I wondered how many of us had ever lived in places where there were no art museums, or whether we'd like to.

And then 'this' happened. The art museum has ceased to be – rather sooner than expected. The bricks and mortar are still there; but there's no-one inside. There is no museum, if there is no public to enter it. It has become something else. The sudden disappearance of 'Public Life' this spring – and its hesitant, contingent re-emergence, whenever and however that might happen – asks us to re-imagine, therefore, what the art museum might be.

The sort of artwork Zaugg was thinking of – 'the work' – can only benefit from the space and silence that social distancing can afford; but the miniature, the watercolour, the gem, cannot be viewed coolly, detached, at a distance. Perhaps they will return to the privileged and private oratories, salons, and *Wunderkammer* for which they were originally conceived, to be handled, passed around and poured over.

Perhaps we will only be allowed into museums one at a time, by appointment, to view the treasures within. Maybe, no-one will be allowed in, and the hoard will become the stuff of rumour and legend – just like it was before the museum was invented – as closed and as enticing as Pharaoh's tomb.

And then, art will only have the street outside. Wasn't that where we all (Zaugg included) said we wanted it to end up, anyway?

And that, without the usual assistance and interventions from museums, biennales and vernissages, is exactly what has happened. In Bristol, one art object of sorts, a Grade II listed bronze statue of a 17<sup>th</sup> century slave trader is, after years of hesitation, and without much opposition, torn down and thrown into the harbour. In Washington DC, an entire street is painted with '#blacklivesmatter' designed to be viewed from your phone (via satellite). In the absence of the museum, the street outside, both forbidden and the only place to go, has become a place where art might matter and where it can be seen.

Who knows how long this will last. Perhaps, in a few months' time, as we sip our coffee in the museum café, we'll wonder what all the fuss was about.

But let's hope not. There's nothing inevitable, nothing sacred about the art museum. Three centuries ago, they didn't exist. This year, for a while, they ceased to be. It might – will – happen again. In the meantime, whether we have museums or not, let's make art work.

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1. Rémy Zaugg, *The Art Museum of My Dreams or A Place for the Work and the Human Being*, Hindrich Sachs, Eva Schmidt (eds.), Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013.

2. Ibid.