

Digital Exhibition of The Bridge: A Visual Art Documentation on Expression during the Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID19 outbreak all over the world has affected many people in various aspects of life; economically, physically, and emotionally. In response to the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020, Malaysia had announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) as a preventive measure to obstruct the spread of COVID19. This action had put even many more people into a state of depression due to loneliness, fear, and isolation. Artist, Suzlee Ibrahim, who understood the artists' feelings of not being able to exhibit during this pandemic had initiated a digital exhibition called The Bridge. This digital exhibition aims to bring together artists from around the world who want to express their feelings during the pandemics as expressions of art. Communication and networking amongst the artists were made through emails, social media, and telephones. The artists sent their artworks through emails, which were then collected and sorted for the exhibition. In conclusion, The Bridge has successfully brought together one hundred and fifty artists from sixty countries to come together and support each other. The Bridge signifies the artists' hope for a better future and a world without COVID19.

Keywords - digital exhibition, art expression, visual art, COVID19

1. Introduction

The COVID19 outbreak in Malaysia started right after Malaysian's celebrated the Chinese New Year on the Lunar Calendar in 2020. In response to World Health Organization (WHO), in March 2020 the federal government had announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) as a preventive measure to obstruct the spread of COVID19. This action was carried out in many other countries as well. The whole world is still facing the virus and some countries like America, India, and Brazil are the top three countries facing Coronavirus in thousands each day. The virus has forced the world to stop daily activities and adapt to the new norms. During the Movement Control Order, or in some countries referred to as lockdown; everyone had to stay at home and avoid meeting other people face-to-face outside their homes. According to the Journal of Depression and Anxiety, there are millions of people who became depressed during the lockdown due to loneliness, anxiety, and isolation (<https://www.longdom.org/special-issue/mental-health-and-depression-during-covid19-991.html>).

Due to this, author and painter, Suzlee Ibrahim has taken the initiative to contact fellow artists around the world to participate in a visual art documentation on artist's expression during the pandemic. This documentation aims

to keep an active art activity, network, and communication among the artists around the world regardless of the pandemic. Such an initiative has provided a healthy platform for mental wellness among the artists' community while trapped in their homes. Artists are synonym to having exhibitions in galleries and open spaces with many people coming as audiences. The lack of gallery activities during the pandemic has certainly affected the state of their mental well-being.

One hundred and fifty artists from sixty countries have contributed to this project. The selection of artists was based on a first-come, first-served basis for each country. The list of artists chosen was from those who had attended well-known art workshops internationally around the world.

This documentation is significant as a reference to art galleries, artists, and art students to research the body of work that they intend to produce. The documentation brings together arts in the form of painting, drawing, print, and sculpture. The artworks produced have a diversity of subject matter that is reflected in the highest level of creativity and knowledge from each artist.

2. The Birth of The Bridge

The Bridge was chosen to signify a relationship between the community of artists around the world. Although confined in their own spaces, artists still produced their artworks. Zervas (2020), in his commentary of The Bridge, "an artwork will not work if no one values it, neither as an artwork to be appreciated nor as an object of commercial value." In regard to this, Zervas the President of Club UNESCO for Arts & Letters in Achaia strongly supports the initiative of running a digital exhibition; The Bridge organized and curated by Suzlee Ibrahim. The compilation of artworks in The Bridge is important to learning institutions to practice and provide constructive criticism towards artworks produced by the artists. That way, artists could produce better work in the future and receive global review and appreciation (Rokbani, Director of Monastir Arts Festival, 2020).

The main success of The Bridge is the core of communication in its passage. Once Suzlee Ibrahim started to plan for The Bridge, he announced for participation using social media platforms and emails. Artists responded, at first, it was difficult to get confirmation from the artists. Many were not sure of how this exhibition would happen. There were a few who thought that they had to send the actual artwork to the organizer. This was the first experience for Suzlee therefore, he had to redraft a proper invitation to make sure that the artists understood the process and regulations of the exhibition. It took two months to collect the visuals, information of the work, and biography of the artists.

The selection of the artists was made out of Suzlee's contact list while attending art workshops in a few countries such as France, Denmark, UAE, Macedonia, and Turkey. Later, news spread as quickly as the virus. At the time the organizer announced that the participation was closed, there were about fifty more artists who were keen to join since the news had just reached them through word-of-mouth.

Social media has always been in a negative light when it comes to matters of the abuse of the platform, where content creators often abuse social media by creating explicit, insensitive, and unethical content. However, the birth of The Bridge has proven that social media and other forms of digital communication have served their best purpose. Kang et al (2019), believes that social media experiences have a tremendous effect on art institutions and viewers, and as media infrastructure continues to update, art experience and participatory culture will begin to change.

3. Art as Expression and A Form of Communication

"Art is a technique of communication.
The image is the most complete technique of all communication."

Claes Oldenburg

Generally, art interprets objects that a person sees in real life, which can be noted as an imitation. The view of art as imitation has been challenged and subsequently replaced by art as a form of expression (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-art/Art-as-expression>). Instead of imitating the physical world, art may now reflect the inner state of an artist. It becomes the manifestation of an inner state of the artists. Interpretation of art comes in many forms such as painting, print, and sculpture.

Dolese et al (2014), emphasize that art is indeed a form of communication. The construction of meanings behind artworks is likened to daily verbal communication or conversations that are used to deliver explicit and implicit meanings. The Bridge can be seen as a compilation of “conversations” because artists use art as a method to communicate and express their thoughts and feelings related to their experiences with the COVID19 pandemic. The term art is expression denotes that artists are sensitive to their surroundings and conscious of his emotion ([plato.stanford.edu/entries/Collingwood aesthetics](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/Collingwood_aesthetics)). The environment often contributes to new ideas that are rarely seen by ordinary people. In The Bridge, the artists continue to produce artworks; even in a condition in which the supply of art materials was low and unable to show their works in the galleries. Few artists did not even have paper to draw or paint on.

The Bridge had given hope to the artists to create their artworks in free form. As mentioned earlier, the works produced for The Bridge are the self-expression of the artists during the pandemic. This program had helped artists to destress and expressed themselves through artistic activities during the pandemic. The artworks produced by the artists include human images, landscape, cityscape, nature, still life, abstract, and images of coronavirus itself.

4. The Artworks

Artist, Franklin Valencia produced watercolor on paper titled *Laban* (Figure 1). *Laban* is a Tagalog word meaning fight or contest (www.tagalog.com). *Laban* sign is a Filipino hand gesture, representing the letter L; meaning fight. The artwork showed a woman figure in blue, perhaps representing a medical officer, wearing a face shield and mask. Today, nurses, medical officers, and volunteers are regarded as the front liners in fighting COVID19. She is pictured sideways, looking ahead and probably thinking of the future. The bird on the artist's head is probably a symbol of freedom and peace that we all wished for.



Figure 1. *Laban* (Franklin Valencia/ Philippines, 2020), Watercolor on paper, 72 x 53 cm

A similar expression is seen in Melissourgaki's work, titled *Silent Scream* (Figure 2). Two seemingly unhappy women are seen sitting on their beds. The situation of the room looked gloomy. The women look depressed sitting in a confined space and looks tense causing the audience to feel the same way.



Figure 2. *Silent Scream* (Magdalena Wozniak Melissourgaki/ Greece, 2020), Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 120 cm

Amit Singh produced a marble sculpture titled, *Keep Distancing 1* (Figure 3). The sculpture sized at 60 x 50 x 20 cm is two heads side by side facing in the same direction. Amit cleverly manipulated the medium, marble with different finishing; one side is glossy and another is left with a raw finishing. It looked as if Amit had used two types of marble. Amit left the audience with a sense of guilt that causes us to choose whether to practice social distancing or not.



Figure 3. *Keep Distancing 1* (Amit Singh/ India, 2020), Black marble, 60 x 50 x 20 cm

The watercolor and collage on paper of Inara Aster Dodson, titled *Daydreaming During Corona* (Figure 4) occupies only a quarter of the paper to show the beautiful landscape. Three-quarter of the paper focuses on the wall of rocks. The rock seems to be a feeling of protest; an expression of hardness and difficulty that reflects the grief experienced by the world.



Figure 4. *Daydreaming During Corona* (Inara Aster Dodson/ USA, 2020), Watercolor and collage on paper, 60 x 34 cm.

Figure 5, *Hope (New Normal)* by Indonesian artist Sys Paindow like many other Indonesian artists uses their cultural material as a subject matter in their artwork. This work uses the image of Buddha that can be seen in the temples around Jogja as the main subject. The artist inserts a landscape image of the temple in the form of a mask on the Buddha statue depicting hope for a better future.



Figure 5. *HOPE (New Normal) #1* (Sys Paindow/ Indonesia, 2020), Oil & acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 x 10 cm

Figure 6. *Nouveau Règle Corporel I*, by Jean Robert Alexis, an artist from Haiti, assumed that the human body today, during COVID19 is capable to articulate the virus that invades their body. The reshaping of the body due to COVID19 ironically meant to bring about the future enhancement of the body to communicate with nature

and an initial signal of its greatest success.



Figure 6. *Nouveau Règle Corporel I* (Jean Robert Alexis/ Haiti, 2020), Bristol paper, pen & marker. 55 x 45 cm.

A very interesting installation by Peruvian sculpture, Miguel Velit, used recycle material set up outside his apartment. He collected materials such as wood, plastic, metal, and paper outside his apartment to make a few sculptures creating a made-up mysterious world. Miguel usually uses metal for his sculpture but here, the artist refused to succumb to the current situation and adapted with materials that he was not accustomed to.



Figure 7. *The World and The Enigma of The COVID 19* (Miguel Angel Velit/ PERU, 2020), Plastic, wood, metal, and paper. 300 x 400 x 200 cm

5. Digital Exhibition and Publication

The documentation of The Bridge is imperative and significant to galleries and artists. The Bridge is documented in the form of a digital exhibition and physical publication. It compiles the works and biographies of 150 artists from 60 countries around the globe. This documentation showcases the various genres of artworks

and mediums used during the COVID 19 pandemic. The virtual exhibition can be viewed at <https://www.suzlee.com/thebridge>, whilst the publication of The Bridge is still in progress.

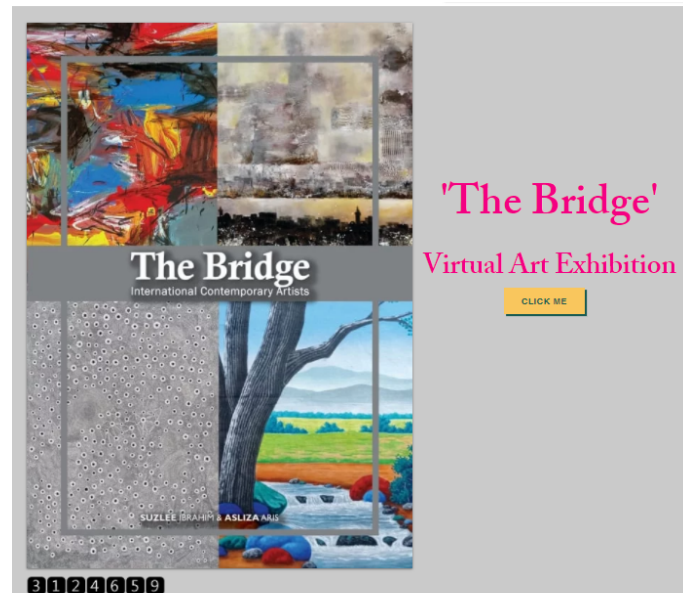


Figure 8. Virtual Art Exhibition can be viewed at <https://www.suzlee.com/thebridge>

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, The Bridge has successfully brought together 160 artists around the world to come together and support each other. The great cooperation received from the artists had finally produced a virtual art exhibition, which is uncommon for them who are indeed heavily dependent on conventional exhibitions in physical galleries. The Bridge also successfully allowed artists to express their concern over the pandemic that plagued worldly life. The Bridge signifies hope for the artists to visualize a brighter future in the virtual world with hopes that the COVID19 will disappear soon. The strength of the relationships among the artists who are connected only through emails and social media made them realized that friendship is not measured by how close a person is to you but friendship can be formed as long as there is communication, the essence of human nature and life.

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