



[CCA@CCA VIRTUAL BRUNCH: Art in a Time of Social Distancing: We Have So Much Further to Go](#)

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The inaugural 2020 Creative Citizens in Action gathering took the form of a digital brunch on Wednesday, September 23rd. CCA professor Sam Vernon moderated the discussion between Ashara Ekundayo, Martin Strickland, PJ Gubatina Policarpio, and Astria Suparak. While Vernon had invited the students who initiated the incredible Working Class & BIPOC Grant Campaign, they could not attend as they had to go to work. While their absence undoubtedly presented a missing part of this constellation of voices, the four other brunch guests spoke candidly and honestly about their experiences as arts professionals working during the lockdown.

Vernon prompted the group to divulge what singular aspect of social distancing had impacted them the most. Most panelists responded that travel restrictions had affected their livelihoods. Multi-institutional curator Ashara Ekundayo noted that curators were expected to travel to see shows and meet artists in the pre-pandemic world. That kind of travel isn't possible now, and it's changing whose work the public is seeing. Artist and curator Astria Suparak noted that thanks to the screen, institutions can broadcast a single lecture to thousands of people anywhere in the world. However, presenters are only paid for delivering one talk, though teachers, students, and institutions may access that single talk months after the event. While increased visibility and accessibility to such gatherings are certainly in the interest of all parties involved, how is this method sustainable for the lecturer? While it seems like we've been in this pandemic forever, there are still so many unknowns about what pay structures *will* versus *should* look like next year, next month, next week. How can we create accessible and enduring programming that ensures all parties are paid fairly for their work?

The conversation then turned to how each individual and their respective institutions had adapted their pre-pandemic programming after shelter-in-place was enforced. Associate Director of Public Life at the YBCA, Martin Strickland, had to restructure the substantial physical exhibition, *Come to Your Census: Who Counts in America*. The show was eight days

away from opening when San Francisco announced shelter-in-place regulations. Strickland, the Art + Action team – Britney Finkel and Amy Kisch – and his YBCA curatorial committee (which included Ekundayo) kept thinking, "How can we still make an impact? How can we honor the work we had planned to show physically? How can we encourage as much participation in the census as possible?" There were online channels available to YBCA to engage the public. Still, in order to reimagine *Come to Your Census* for online platforms, they had to ask the artists to do additional work. The *Come to Your Census* team looked at their budget and realized that money that was tied up in exhibitions or programming that would not take place due to the pandemic could be reallocated. What resulted was a series of interviews, taped conversations, and recordings encouraging people to take the census. Strickland emphasized that when he approached these artists, he made sure they knew they were in no way obliged to participate in this additional programming. The content echoed Ekundayo's work in her new media platform and art book, *Artist as the First Responder*: the artists were first to show up. Artists never stop working. They did not stop working when March 19th hit, even though the act of creation was now consuming more "psychic blood," to quote Ekundayo, than ever before. Strickland said the digital work's success came from building relationships with those artists and from the artists' can-do attitude.

The panelists also discussed the necessity of redefining success, as the former milestones denoting "success" no longer apply to current circumstances. Suparak began measuring success during the pandemic through quantifiable means: metrics on social media, the number of views on the webinar's recording, the number of new followers gained after a webinar, and how many new opportunities arose from online programs. PJ Gubatina Policarpio translated a youth program online by restructuring meeting times from one 3-hour block to two 1.5-hour blocks to avoid Zoom exhaustion. He also outlined his own exploration of Artist as First Responders through a publication that frames poets as truth tellers. Like Strickland, Gubatina Policarpio knew that it was even more crucial now than before to offer substantial honorariums. Knowing that creating original material was taking up a lot of "psychic blood," he asked the contributing writers to submit any works they wanted to share with the world during this moment of pandemic and social upheaval. In my opinion, having artists and writers say yes, participate in a project, and get paid for their work is a success during this epoch of endemicity.

My big takeaway from the gathering was how far we have to go. We're beginning to understand how the function of art in society has changed in the age of social distancing. Many of our professional lives have become dances on a thread tied to dire questions from "the Art World" on one side, and real questions of precarity and survival on the other. We've also learned to be more comfortable being uncomfortable and learned to question the structures that upheld pre-pandemic "normalcy." It took 6-months for us to understand how our values will continue to change to create meaningful work now, and beyond the time of social distancing. Ultimately, we cannot know what the next year, two years, ten years have in store for us, but we've been able to weather the storm so far.

That being said, in the spirit of "we'll all get through this together," the Working Class & BIPOC CCA scholarship fund is still \$10,000 away from their goal! [Please donate here](#) to help support the Working Class and Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color at CCA continue their work.

CCA@CCA Hosts Virtual Brunch: A conversation on Art in Times of Social Distancing was organized by CCA Exhibitions, moderated by Sam Vernon, and featured Members of the Working Class & BIPOC Grant Campaign, Ashara Ekundayo, Astria Suparak, PJ Gubatina Policarpio, Martin Strickland.

Do you have questions or opinions about this response? Have you seen an event at CCA you'd like to report on? Please email exhibitions@cca.edu to contribute to our Letters to the Editor series, or to submit to *Review Rewind Respond*.

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