

After the world closes, how do we come together?

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Over the last year we collectively watched from the solitude of our homes as the world closed. Aside from labour, which forcibly continued, we found ourselves unable to see family and friends, leave the house or organise socially. Parts of life which may have been ingrained as organic or natural ceased to exist. Access to public, group-oriented culture was put on pause, as cultural venues universally closed their doors for the first time. Yet, to say culture ceased to exist during this time is untrue. In fact, culture has been occurring in informal spaces outside of the gallery and museum long before COVID-19. In her essay ‘The first galleries I knew were black homes’ poet Abodance Matanda reflects that as a black working-class woman, she is unlikely to see her experiences portrayed in visual culture or art history. Instead of looking to the institutional cultural landscape for validation or acceptance, Matanda acknowledges that her experience of culture and art making occurs in less formalised spaces: I’ll focus on our capital city’s working class landscape [...] as I tell you how black homes were the first galleries I knew. ’

Matanda’s sentiment, that for black communities and those not traditionally represented by the cultural sector, culture is organised in spaces outside of the institution, is one echoed by academic and activist Janine Francois [in a series of tweets from 13th May 2020](#). Francois goes a step further, by referencing how the cultural sector takes a paternalistic, colonialist approach to community outreach, through an assumption that marginalised people need to be brought into institutional culture because they do not have access to culture on their own terms. What this institutional approach refuses to admit, as succinctly put by Francois, is that ‘marginalised ppl privilege their own culture making above Culture with a capital C (referred to as ‘Culture.’)’

The overriding institutional messaging that “art is for everyone”, and therefore should be engaged with by anyone regardless of their background, presumes that given the opportunity everyone would want to walk through the doors of a gallery or museum. When I think of galleries and museums, even as someone working within the sector, I think of stagnant, cold, lifeless spaces, with white walls and unfriendly invigilators stalking the halls. Whereas culture that exists in the “margins” often stems from collectivised, community-led worlds. Culture which exists in living rooms, kitchens, on the streets and on dancefloors is antithetical to institutional organising because it contains the veracity of daily life in a way that institutions could only dream of achieving.

In fact, far from diminishing culture, COVID-19 strengthened informal, community-centered arts organising. Though the closure of arts venues and cancelling of festivals only served to intensify the already precarious gig economy many artists are reliant on to survive, we also witnessed an increase in artists supporting one another to find alternative streams of revenue and cultural creation. In their blogpost ‘I woke up and the arts was gone’ writer and performer Harry Josephine Giles criticises the over reliance on festival structures, noting that COVID only made the precarity of arts economies more visible, as it revealed that when festivals can’t go ahead artists and performers lose the fees they were depending on to survive. Simultaneously, Giles refuses to grieve the arts which has been lost, instead hoping that something better might emerge in its place:

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‘Artists are coming together in beautiful community right now, to work out how they can sustain each other’s lives and how they can make and share art. It is an astonishing thing. What we also need to do is work out how we can maintain these artist-led communities of survival beyond the conditions of the present crisis, before capital and the state loom over us and force us back into a system that has never worked.’

If festival culture previously presented an exclusive, temporary revenue for artists, while failing to serve many of the communities situated along the festival circuit, Deptford X has taken this moment to re-situate what a festival could be. Director of the annual festival, Nathalie Boobis, reflects on a need to counteract the gatekeeping tendencies inherent in curation, to instead prioritise an alignment with the way culture ebbs and flows throughout wider society; ‘the only way to truly open up access to an art that is about the joy of creation; expression; reflection; connection - and is actually representative of the world we live in - is to stop gatekeeping and let things keep spilling out!’ In 2021, Deptford X exists as a wholly outdoor and public occasion, taking place in the streets, in shopfronts, and even via radio airwaves. While simultaneously dispelling the tradition of festivals in providing one-off, temporary support to artists, by building a longer-term peer support network for Black Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC) who participated in Support Network, a facet of the festival’s 2020 Online festival (with workshops and mentoring sessions led by and for BIPOC creatives).

The organising of this year’s festival has been led with an understanding of the healing and socially cohesive potentials of art making, without an expectation on audiences to get out and through the doors of a building in order to experience the commissions. By deprioritising a need to physically enter a space, Deptford X have opened new potentials for disabled inclusivity, ensuring that anyone who is socially isolated or cannot physically get into the city is still able to engage with aspects of the festival. Through a partnership with Deptford’s own AAJA radio, artworks will flow seamlessly into people’s homes, through six, thirty-minute commissioned artworks being broadcast daily at midday from Tuesday 13th – Sunday 18th July.

For anyone walking around Deptford, the streets will be activated with multiple interventions from artists. One of the only pieces of art I managed to see in 2020 was Chila Kumari Singh Burman’s large-scale installation *remembering a brave new world* at Tate Britain in Vauxhall which saw the building overtaken with neon lights in celebration of Diwali. With interwoven references to Hindu mythology, Bollywood imagery, colonial history and personal memories, Burman’s installation provided expansive visual references to unravel, while illuminating the night sky. I sat on the steps of Tate Britain on one freezing night in December and watched as people travelled from across London to witness the installation, taking photos with friends, stopping on the steps to sit and chat, and reinvigorating the way we look at art in the city. For Deptford X, Burman will once again catalyse a new meeting place for onlookers to stop and enjoy art, with a larger-than-life neon mermaid outside of Deptford’s library.

One of the places I’ve witnessed culture happening most prominently in real time, is on the dancefloor – a cultural history that is certainly rooted in Deptford. My own relation to experiencing culture unfurling on the dancefloor in Deptford is located in the contemporary, during one of Steam Down’s infamous jazz nights at Buster Mantis. Yet, in *Steam Down or How Things Begin*, journalist Emma Warren traces the foundations of Deptford’s

contemporary music scene to the locality's soundsystem culture, where at St Paul's church 'reggae soundsystems played in The Crypt every Friday through the late 1970s and 1980s.'

The cultural history of music and dance in Deptford is evoked throughout Deptford X's 2021 festival. Harold Offeh's *Urbane Dance Marathon* draws on the artist's 'ongoing research into histories of social dancing as responses to social and collective traumas and the healing power of dance and duration', a pertinent consideration as we continue to face the ongoing repercussions of a global pandemic. Offeh invites audiences to engage in the 'redemptive power of public space, personal movement and social engagement' through a downloadable audio guide which will lead viewers on a dance journey across the area. Meanwhile, Bryan Giuseppi Rodriquez Campana's *Dancing with my future to Salserin* 'imagines the artist's metaphysical future through a group-choreographed dance-performance.' Dance presents an opportunity to know oneself better and to build social connection within communities, as noted by Warren, 'The real ingenuity is in people coming together to do a thing and in the process becoming more themselves.'

Deptford X evokes the limitless spaces where culture takes place: on the streets, on the dancefloor, in our homes and on the radio. This year's festival is an acknowledgement of the many people and places where culture is produced, without prioritising one form of making over another. It is in these spaces that we have the chance to come together, to reconnect with ourselves and one another. Perhaps best summarised by Warren in a closing statement written pre pandemic in 2019, which feels all the more pertinent today:

'It is human to gather to dance and sing. We've been doing it since the beginning of our time. We need to reflect our lives into art and culture so that we can imagine better or different futures, and we need this more than ever. I don't need to list the challenges we face in the coming decades, but it seems obvious that we'll need to tap into the forces of togetherness to ride the troubles coming our way.'

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