

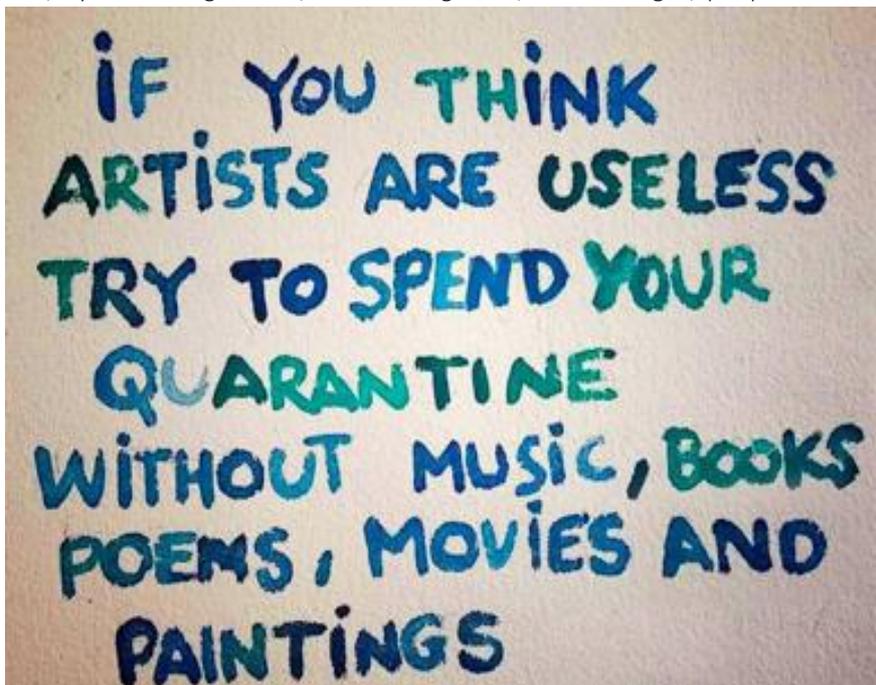
“Getting Closer” Through Art: Facebook and Turning to Art in The Time of Covid-19.

MANUELA PELLEGRINO

How to feel close when physically distant? This is, of course, not a new dilemma in itself; indeed, people who live far from their loved ones have long relied on technological solutions: video-calls with multiple participants, for instance, re-establish a 'visual' connection, albeit deprived of tactile sensory perception. Social distancing, however, has become a key expression and a challenging reality during the Covid-19 crisis. Aiming to avoid the transmission of the virus, its enforcement on a global scale has also forced us to reshape our ideas and practices of 'feeling close'. Social networks in particular have come to the rescue, offering multiple ways to fill the physical distance between people that Covid-19 has imposed; 'virtual means' such as Facebook, which have often been demonised for denying the 'human touch' of a face-to-face encounter, have increasingly acquired a crucial presence even in the lives of those who are not usually cybernetically oriented. I am no exception; I am not really a Facebookian creature, and yet, particularly during the first few weeks of this collective struggle, I ended up spending a lot of time 'online'.

One of the things that struck me almost immediately was the proliferation of Facebook groups dealing with art. First was my friend Luigi who invited me “to find some beauty in a parallel universe” and therefore join the group *Segni di sublime bellezza* – “Signs of sublime beauty”; this focuses on visual art, paintings and sculptures ranging from classical to 19th century art. The group was not created during the Covid-19 crisis – it dates back to 2015 – but its membership increased dramatically in the last month (over 4000 new members out of an overall total of 18872, an increase of over 1500%!). Artworks such as these – often idyllic representations – offer a means of escaping from a collective uncanny reality– the agency of artworks, as Alfred Gell (1998) would say. By 'consuming' art, by interacting with it, commenting on it, and sharing it, people find temporary refuge in that “parallel

universe”, to quote Luigi again.



Posted on Facebook

Although the members of these art appreciation groups such as this are still passive consumers of art, the Facebook group *Arteinquarantena* (“art in quarantine”) increasingly caught my attention; created on the 15th March 2020, it explicitly invited people to post their own “photography, painting, sculpture, performance, poetry, writing, drawings” and to “tell us how you are spending time while confined in your own houses”. This was still a

way “to find refuge”, if you will, albeit not only by consuming art, but instead by sharing one's own creations. Indeed, I started noticing how my Facebook friends were increasingly sharing their thoughts about Covid-19 in creative/artistic forms: writing poems, short-stories, composing songs or staging small theatrical performances. My friend Sara for instance created the hashtag *#scrivoperscappare* – “*#lwritetoescape*” – inviting people to do the same “to escape the world and leave our houses with our own fantasy”. Then there was the initiative *Teatro alla finestra* – “Theatre at the window” where my amateur theatre actors and friends posted their videos: comic and ironic sketches in which they comment on the slogan *Andràtuttobene* – “Everythingwillbefine”.



By Andy Trema,
creator of *Arteinquarantena* Facebook Page

This widespread tendency to turn to artistic expression continued to fascinate me. In instances like these, art works as a sort of collective – albeit personal – self-help, which is then crucially shared collectively through Facebook. Art thereby fulfils one of its many functions, not simply providing a venue to look for and find escape, but actually offering the very means, the language so to speak, through which people engage with this challenging time, its uncertainties and controversies.

“Art too is just a way of living”- Rainer Maria Rilke would say, or to use Morphy's words “art can be a mode of acting in the world” (2009), embedded in people's ordinary life and not necessarily confined to established norms and forms—online and offline. Art defined in this way is a central component of my own research projects; indeed, I have encountered multiple ways in which people turn to art for multiple purposes. My year-long fieldwork in Grecia Salentina revealed how artistic expressions have over time given a renewed 'life' to Griko; this is a language of Greek origin used in the Southern Italian region of Puglia, which has acquired a performative aura while losing its function as a medium for daily communication. I also encounter art in my current research, this time as a means used by my informants to express dissent towards the construction of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline in Salento, bringing gas from Azerbaijan to Southern Italy – these varied artistic responses include paintings, songs, performances, as well as murals, poems, and fairytales for children.

Yet, what I find most promising and most revealing about the use of art on Facebook in the time of Covid-19 is the growth of art as a way of creating shared moments, albeit from afar. The hashtags *#distantimauniti*, *#vicinimalontani*, (“*#farbutunited*”, *#closebutdistant*”) for instance have become widespread – and in multiple languages. The very first initiative of this kind I noticed was a DJ live session on Facebook, which I joined and thoroughly enjoyed: each of us could see our friends joining in one by one, commenting on the selection of music and making suggestions. This allowed for a more participatory approach. Indeed, more and more interactive initiatives were organised; initiatives of collective story-writing where people contribute by writing a small passage of what will ultimately become a collective novel; or else collective creations ranging from compiling music videos in which each person would sing a stanza of a song; but also collective poetry reading – where each person in a

chain reads one sentence/passage of a poem.

From consuming art collectively as a form of entertainment and escape from a gloomy reality, to turning to art as a means of coping in creative ways with the widely felt sense of emptiness, to using it as a way of recreating social closeness, albeit from afar: it seems to me that art has been ultimately used to bridge 'social distancing' – this interpersonal/physical distancing which has been enforced on us. In the time of Covid-19 it is also through this kind of multilayered approach to art on Facebook that people have created and accessed multiple ways of “getting – and feeling – closer”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Manuela is CHS fellow at Harvard University.