



# Art is the Anti-End of the World

**NICOLAS IDIER**

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*Art is the anti-end of the world. It will bring us together, bridges, channels, hearts and minds, an invisible parliament where not any voice will be silenced. Not a leisure park, as the majors of the global entertainment companies try to incarcerate our sense and sensibility, but a infinite agora to reinvent a fare globalization.*

黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛  
我却用它寻找光明  
—（顾城，一代人）

The dark night gave me dark eyes  
I use it to look for the light  
— (GU CHENG)



We are experiencing Art in a way we never did before. Our endangered times may be operating a genetic mutation on us, transforming an increasing portion of human beings as a presentable Walking Dead outfit not far away from the Robert Kirkman comic series. A morbid combination of prisoners surrounded with a digital and military wire fence, contaminated vulnerabilities accused of being the agents of the pandemic, waiting for some miraculous (and certainly expensive) remedy. Or the lonesome judge-penitents in Albert Camus' *The Fall*, shouting alone in the middle of the desert.

In this black hole civilization, Art may offer a path through the night. During the lockdown of spring 2020, I was obsessed about the public libraries, museums, theatres, art houses and cinemas all across the entire world. At night, while the planet was breathing and the sky having a rest from the unremitting airplane ballet, I was navigating from one museum website to another, disrespectful from every geographical and time constraint, increasingly depressed by the automatic announcement, in every language of the world: "We are closed as a precautionary measure to help contain the spread of coronavirus." I was thinking about them, the unread books, the unseen paintings, the untouched sculptures, the unplayed concerts, locked-down in these cultural fortresses – and somehow, I was more and more convinced about the importance to unlock them, to make them free. Our own freedom depends on their

freedom. Art is vulnerable. How can we help a bird with broken wings to fly again without crushing its fragile abdomen?

In the meantime, the proliferation of digital meetings, social media fever, TV shows and continuous flow of news about the global situation may have transformed each one of us as simulacra, putting everything, including Art and Education, on the same level of the flat screen. The capitalism was at ease: trespassing the problem of infrastructures, denying any form of resistance to a global locked-down population, drafting its development plan to a renewed productivity based on Smart Cities, Smarts Villages, Smart Countryside – Artificial Intelligence without critical mind.

In French language, the lock-down sanitary measures are called confinement. It reminds us how imperialism comes with two parallel strategies, as Franz Fanon' Wretched of the Earth analysed it: a system of exclusion and a system of confinement, and whatever violence and repression is used is justified in the name of reason, rationality, public health.

Is Art of any help to struggle against such a system? Or is it a way to make it less hurting, infinitely depicting a phenomenon, powerless, neutralized, and sanitized? Can a bird flying in its cage with invisible bars and a Windows-like blue sky above still be defined as a bird? Step by step, texts after texts, the ideas became stronger thanks to this shared experience, and finally revealed a thought not unique but common. Art was not a tradition anymore: it was a contemporary creation, encompassing each one of us. We are like Jonas (or Yunus in the Koran) in the belly of the whale. If we refuse the resurrection to come as a Biblical judgment (Matthew, 12), we have to create our own breach. Art can provide the map to the prison break.

Time has come to reweave the close link between creators and citizens. Cultural spaces have to reopen, even if their activity is very reduced. It is vital to inhabit the world and that a place of culture must be a place of life above all, even if it is no longer a place of representation of the world, but only of life. It is never too late to fight against representation as an authority.

“Representations are a form of human economy, in a way, and necessary to life in society and, in a sense, between society. So I don't think there is any way of getting away from them – they are as basic as language. What we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the kind of authority which, to my mind, has been repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented.”

I cannot agree more with these words of Edward Said in a 1985 interview in the New York based *Wedge* magazine. Every part of the population, not excluding any one, should bring their own culture to this new path of Art, in a participative way. In the long-term creation as such would emerge from this pragmatic relationship with the daily lives of the citizens.

When I say that the cultural spaces must open, I am not talking only about their social and educational missions, but also as public services and part of the economic life. Especially since these places are often well located, in crossroads geographies (even in rural areas - like where I live, the only living place in the village of 500 inhabitants is a public library backed by a village hall -, and suburban areas, with actors in the field who are too rarely approached by the cultural world), Art can help us map a new geography of citizenship. What is the flying bird able to see?

As for creation as such, breeding ground for all innovations, we should not worry too much: when it is driven by a necessity, it always manages to find the way.

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I use it to look for the light  
— (GU CHENG)*

Here. In short, we have to look for the light. And don't just scratch our eyes!

What is Art doing to me? The scale of this question needs to be enlarged. What is Art doing to whom?

Let me share one of the most vivid experiences I ever had with art. A group of teenagers from a suburb area had worked intensely on a dance project during ten days. There were more than one language, and a large part of these young people were black with African and Comorian origins. The choreography was their common language, a new collective mother tongue without any inherited burden. They were dancing under the artistic and social guidance of one of these unknown fighters who give all they have to enhance the potentialities of children usually bound into a pessimistic pattern. The result was simply stunning, unforgettable. Watching it, on a very sweet summer night, in the middle of a crowd smiling behind the face masks, my eyes became bathed with an irrepressible emotion and then, it was all clear.

Art is doing this miracle to bring people together.  
Do you know why?

Henry Miller, in a letter to John Cowper Powys (sent from Big Sur, California, on the 17th April 1950), was writing: "Our young people seems to be ruined even before having started to create anything. The problem, I guess, being they are all waiting for the end of the world."

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## **NICOLAS IDIER**

Nicolas Idier holds a doctoral degree in Art History from Sorbonne University. He is a scholar of graphic arts and is a sinologist. Idier is the author of several the *Electric Nights in Beijing* (Yatra Books, 2020) translated from French by Sindhuja Veeraragavan. He is a member of the editorial board of several publications including the journal *Nunc*.