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Editorial

Special Issue: COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues into a third successive year, its profound influence on most aspects of contemporary life stubbornly persists. The pandemic itself is not unprecedented, in length or impact. Yet this fact is not a comfort because the various consequences of this slowly evolving event affect us nevertheless, with no indication of when these conditions will ease or which transformational changes will remain. One indication of the anxiety this uncertainty produces, globally and in our own communities, is our efforts to comprehend the significance of the pandemic. Web search queries for the term “new normal” peaked around the world in April–May 2020, when the contrast was greatest between our limited knowledge of the COVID-19 virus and its obvious effects on our societies (Google Trends, 2022). Yet search data from specific countries offers a more revealing view of our collective uncertainties. In highly developed states, such as Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, where most of the submissions to *Ars Medica* originate, this desire to better understand what is “normal” waxed and waned over the past two years as we experienced several phases of what is still the first stage of this epidemic (World Health Organization, 2009).

The purpose of this special issue is to highlight creative responses to the pandemic—and the conditions our contributors experienced, both collectively and individually, as a result—during what

we might label its first major phase. During this period, much of the developed world retreated into relative isolation, without much indication of what would occur next. What is now clear is that forced isolation facilitated alternative forms of expression and interaction among artists, especially those forms possible across distances. (Indeed, the editors of this issue collaborated remotely from San Francisco, Toronto, and Vancouver.)

Of course, we anticipated that the profound effects of isolation would be a theme in these works. However, several contributors presented an ironic take on this situation. Notwithstanding the potentially negative psychological impacts of physical and social isolation, several pieces in this issue show that it has become strangely comforting to observe collective frustration toward our circumstances and the virus itself. For example, in their interview with Emilie Kadhim for this issue, **Valentín Falconí** and **Toni Alarco** note that many animators who contributed to the #StopMoMonsters project chose (without prompting) to portray the destruction of the virus in one way or another: smashed, consumed, or thrown away. These repeated sequences encouraged viewers of the project to affirm that we are not alone in our feelings of impotent frustration, and they offered catharsis too.

A related phenomenon, which persists today and is another theme throughout this issue, is disruptions to our perceptions of space and time. Just as the pandemic has progressed in unexpected ways, our lives no longer seem bound by familiar, cohesive milestones. The pandemic has upended

how we temporally organize our lived experience, through repeated-and-seemingly-endless “waves” of medical emergency, followed by other fluctuations, upheavals, and the dysregulation of our personal narratives. **Keith Schwager** conveys how this uncertainty can become mundane in his staccato verse: “Deaths, / and recoveries / forgotten in repetitions of / yesterday / and tomorrow.” Many visual works in this issue also reveal signs of this contradiction. As the pandemic continues, we grow more accustomed to this alienating feeling.

That said, we were surprised at how contributors often expressed optimism amid this chaos. **Kayla Whitney’s** illustration is a good example. Her message, “WE WILL HUG AGAIN,” gives meaning to an otherwise disembodied pair of hands: simply, that this isolation is not for forever. In the meantime, the subjects of **Teri Donovan’s** collages keep their hands busy (they are, as she explains in the title of one work, “Taking Care of Business”) as they attempt to manage the coronavirus in their own imagined lives. We might interpret the invitation to “do *something*” a bit differently now, nearly two years into the pandemic. Nevertheless, this impulse motivated our contributors to seek out opportunities for creative expression with others. In other words, they did not *act* in isolation and, as a result, we benefit from their desire to make meaning collaboratively. Many of those same feelings of uncertainty about the future continue to trouble us. This special issue proposes that it is better to confront them together.

References

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Emilie Kadhim, Rachel Lallouz, & David Mastey