

Culture and Crisis— What Lies Ahead?

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Through history, crises have always proven fertile grounds for the arts, leading to spurts of breakthroughs and creativity. In this essay, policy maker and thinker Sir Geoff Mulgan shares his thoughts on three current slow crises faced by humankind—climate change, powerful new technologies, and social inequality and recognition—and their impact on artists and their roles.

The arts are often helped by crisis. Past wars generated extraordinary poetry, breakthroughs in painting, and radical invention in film. This link between social dislocation and creativity was famously captured in a line from the film *The Third Man*, when its anti-hero Harry Lime remarks that “In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed. They produced Michaelangelo, da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did they produce? The cuckoo clock.”

So, are our current crises producing an explosion of creativity or not? Lockdowns certainly gave millions of artists time to produce: to compose, paint, write, or sculpt without the distraction of performances or exhibitions. An extraordinary range of COVID-inspired art is now available online, as well as art intended to address the mental health challenges of the pandemic. Lockdowns also forced new kinds of creativity—like mass online performances, collaborations on Zoom, and an acceleration of hybrids of face-to-face and online. This is a deeper truth embedded in the digital turn of museums, which once were all about the stories they told but now are increasingly confronted with communities and publics who want to tell us what they know.

But the pandemic also wreaked economic havoc on the arts as buildings closed and income dried up. It closed off the conviviality that is so vital for creativity, and it appears that innovation of many kinds slowed down during the pandemic as the attributes that make cities buzz were put on hold.

Yet the arts are both feeding off and contributing to our ability to cope with the big crises of our times. Here I briefly touch on three of the slow crises that sit alongside the fast crisis of COVID-19: the crisis of climate change; the unfolding challenges and crises prompted by powerful new technologies; and the sometimes fast and sometimes slow crises of inequality and recognition.

Bearing witness: climate change

Climate change is now the most visible big crisis, prompting an extraordinary range of artistic responses. Most try to bear witness to what is happening. Olafur Eliasson’s blocks of ice melting in city squares vividly make people think about climate change as a reality, not an abstraction. A similar effect is achieved by Andri Snær Magnason’s plaque to commemorate a lost glacier in Iceland or the World Meteorological Organization’s short videos presenting fictional weather reports from different countries in the year 2050, *WMO Weather Reports 2050*. Others turn the medium into the message, reusing waste materials to signal the emergence of a more circular economy.

Literature is also grappling with climate change. What one author called “socio-climatic

imaginaries” can be found in novels such as Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Green Earth* (both from 2015) which go beyond the eco-apocalypse to examine the multiple interactions between nature and social organisation. Kim Stanley Robinson has spoken of science fiction as “a kind of future-scenarios modelling, in which some course of history is pursued as a thought experiment, starting from now and moving some distance off into the future” (Beauchamp 2013) and makes a good case that literature is better placed to do this than anything else. As the warning signs of crisis intensify, we should expect all the arts to respond in creative ways, both warning and bearing witness but also pointing to how we might collectively solve our shared problems.

Investigating complex challenges

The second big crisis—in the sense of being both a threat and opportunity—comes from algorithms and a connected world. Here the role of the arts seems to be more about investigating complex challenges and dilemmas. Many fear that technology will destroy jobs, and corrode our humanity and our ethics. So it is not surprising that we are seeing an extraordinary upsurge of art works both using and playing with the potential of artificial intelligence (AI).

For some artists, AI is primarily interesting as a tool—GPT3 writing fiction; Google Tiltbrush and Daydream in VR; or the growing use of AI by musicians and composers. There are many wonderful examples of emerging art forms, like *Quantum Memories* at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. But others are trying to

dig deeper to help us make sense of the good and the bad of what lies ahead. Look for example at the work of Soh Yeong Roh and the Nabi Center in South Korea exploring “Neotopias” of all kinds and how data may reinvent or dismantle our humanity. Lu Yang’s brilliant *Delusional Mandala* investigates the brain, imagination, and AI, connecting neuroscience and religious experience to our newfound powers to generate strange avatars.

AI’s capacity to generate increasingly plausible works of visual art and music is of course a direct threat to artists, and perhaps encourages a hostile or at least sceptical response in works like Hito Steyerl’s projects exploring surveillance and robotics like *HellYeahWeFuckDie*; Trevor Paglen playing with mass surveillance and AI; or Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s *Can’t Help Myself*, on out-of-control robots. Others are more ambiguous. Ian Cheng’s *Emissaries* series imagined a post-apocalyptic world of AI fauna, while Sarah Newman’s work, such as the *Moral Labyrinth*, explores in a physical space how robots might mirror our moral choices, giving a flavour of a future where algorithms guide our behaviours.

Andreas Refsgaard’s work is playful in a similar vein, using the algorithm to assess whether people are trustworthy enough to be allowed to ask questions. Shu Lea Cheang’s work *3x3x6* references the standards for modern prisons with 3x3 square metre cells monitored continuously by six cameras, using this to open up questions about surveillance and sousveillance, and the use of facial recognition technologies to judge sexuality, including in parts of the world where it is illegal to be gay. Kate Crawford’s fascinating project, *Anatomy of an AI System*, on the Amazon Echo (now at MOMA) is another good, didactic example, revealing the material and data flows that lie behind AI.

Each of these brings to the surface the opaque new systems of power and decision-making that surround us and the hugely complex problems of ethical judgement that come with powerful artificial intelligence.

Advocating for change

The third slow burning crisis concerns inequality in all its forms, at a time when power and wealth have been even more concentrated than ever in the hands of a tiny minority. The arts have always played a central role in advocating for greater equality, from the feminist utopias of the 18th century to the revolutionary films and murals of the 20th. They have also, of course, been bound up with wealth and power, dependent on kings and patrons, and today on the super-rich. The world of arts is now inescapably bound up with the many battles underway over gender, race, sexuality, and the responsibilities of institutions—sometimes bearing witness, sometimes investigating but often acting as advocate.

A striking example is the way the Black Lives Matter movement sparked an extraordinary rethink around the world. An interesting recent example is the transformation of the public statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, now covered with a growing forest of slogans and the names of victims of police violence. Many arts institutions are now being held to account for their treatment of historical memory, their links to slavery (like the Tate Gallery in the UK), and the connections of the arts establishments to the more malign features of contemporary capitalism. A good example is the work of Forensic Architecture challenging the role of the then vice-chair of the Whitney Museum over his company's role in

making tear gas, a rare example of challenging elite power in the art market.

The top end of the arts market is now entwined with the world of fashion and the lives of the ultra-rich—a symptom of, more than a solution for what has gone wrong with the world. High-end art generally favours forms of art that are abstract or ambiguous, pays lip service to equality but avoids anything too specific, and is now playing with new financial devices like NFT to commoditise art as a luxury good.

But a radically different energy is now coming from the bottom up, with a demand for the arts to be more engaged and more accountable. My sense is that this is fast becoming a generational divide, with an older generation reasserting the artists' autonomy and freedom from accountability, and taking for granted a world of patrons and galleries not so different from a few centuries ago, and a younger generation no longer convinced that this is right for our era.

Art can thrive on crisis; it can bear witness, explain, and provoke. Many sense that a period of relative stability may be coming to an end. The first half of the 20th century brought world wars and revolutions from Russia to China. But history then slowed down—in good ways for much of the world. The Cold War froze international affairs, and the period after its end brought far fewer big wars and fewer revolutions, even as parts of the world descended into civil war.

The 21st century by contrast appears set to see history accelerate again, with the looming confrontation between the US and China, the rising pressures of climate instability, and the fragility of a world more dependent on networks and machine intelligence.

That may or may not be good for the arts. Harry Lime's comment on Switzerland does not quite fit today's world, where the countries producing the most successful artists are generally stable and prosperous such as Germany and the US, rather than steeped in crisis and civil war.

But perhaps a little discomfort is good for the arts and may better help artists to help us make sense of the crises around us and to sensitise us to what is not obvious. That may also prompt them to work harder to be part of the solutions rather than part of the problem and to help us to be actors not just observers. □

About the Author



Sir Geoff Mulgan is Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy & Social Innovation at University College London (UCL). He was CEO of Nesta, the UK's innovation foundation, from 2011-2019. From 1997-2004, Geoff had roles in the UK government including as director of the government's Strategy Unit and head of policy in the Prime Minister's office. Before then, he was a pioneer of creative city and creative economy strategies that were widely adopted around the world. He has been a reporter on BBC TV and radio and was the founder/co-founder of many organisations, including Demos, Uprising, the Social Innovation Exchange, and Action for Happiness. He has a PhD in telecommunications and has been visiting professor at LSE and Melbourne University, and senior visiting scholar at Harvard University. Past books include *The Art of Public Strategy*, *Good and Bad Power*, *Big Mind: How Collective Intelligence Can Change Our World*, and *Social Innovation: How Societies Find the Power to Change*. His Twitter handle is @geoffmulgan and website is geoffmulgan.com.

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