

Mass Isolation Australia 2020

Written by curators
Shaohui Kwok and
Amelia Seward

Mass Isolation Australia was created in the midst of lockdown in March 2020 to establish a visual record of the pandemic and quickly became a way to see the pandemic unfold through Australian eyes, and a source of connection and community in a time of social distance.

More than 12,000 images were uploaded to the #MassIsolationAus Instagram project from photographers across rural, regional and metropolitan Australia. Curated by Shaohui Kwok and Amelia Seward in 2020, this essay reflects upon a truly unique period in our history.

Mass Isolation Australia: Capturing a physically distanced nation

Photography has long provided a documentary role in society, capturing events and moments recorded in time – documenting the present for the future. In 2020, there has been a palpable sense of history in the making during this once-in-a-generation global health crisis of COVID-19. This pandemic will augment the way society operates from here on. Its economical and emotional effects, and how we are navigating through this period of time, will be studied at schools in future and written about in numerous books to come. Documenting this moment and shift through photography has allowed us to capture our 'new normal' – a life featuring deserted train stations, empty streets, people grocery shopping adorned in masks, living rooms full of families binge-watching Netflix together in their new downtime at home, and essential employees working tirelessly to support others.

The world has been adjusting to new ways of working and learning from home. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought much of society as it was to a halt, bringing fear and uncertainty with it. Whilst we are living through a health crisis most would like to forget; it is worth recording for the future. As Susan Sontag commented, "To photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it all, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt".^[1] The Ballarat International Foto Biennale's (BIFB) *Mass Isolation Australia* project takes individual moments and places them together in an archive that attempts to resist time's melt. Being one of the most unusual scenarios most of us will face in our lifetime, it fulfils a desire to record this uneasy journey in which we are forced to partake.

Mass Isolation Australia was created in partnership with FORMAT Photography Festival in the United Kingdom and the Gallery of Photography in Ireland. It serves to document this momentous period and contribute to international conversations of isolation while providing a unique localised perspective.^[2] Moreover, it allows us to share experiences and find connections in a time where many felt distanced and alone.

The project invited the Australian public to share photographs of their experiences and observations through mandatory lockdown and life during isolation. BIFB created a localised Australian archive of the pandemic through the hashtag #MassIsolationAus. Making use of digital technology and the social media platform Instagram, the project was made accessible to everyday image takers and professional photographers alike, establishing a multi-faceted and nuanced feed of this strange and tumultuous year.

The string of Mass Isolation projects were originally inspired by the 1937 Mass Observation project in Britain, where a team of observers and volunteer writers were recruited to study and report on the everyday lives of people in Britain.[3] Documentation came in the form of diaries, surveys, and information collected by investigators who anonymously observed public scenarios. Now held at the University of Sussex, the archive includes material from 1937 to 1949 with some entries from the 1950s and 1960s. A newer project modelled after the original version resurged in 1981 and continues today, signifying a continued interest in studying, understanding and recording the everyday lives of people.

Like *Mass Observation*, *Mass Isolation Australia*'s objective was to document and archive a changing period in time. However, *Mass Isolation Australia* seeks to expand on this by creating a network of sharing and caring, in order to stand in solidarity with our community. As project curators, we selected images from those submitted by the general public via the #MassIsolationAus hashtag. Anyone from photography professionals to those with no prior experience and armed with a smartphone were able to participate. Hence, this ongoing archive could reflect a broader representation of life in Australia during the pandemic – one that is as democratic and accessible as possible.

It was important to focus not only on chronological events but the overall experience – to show how people felt, what they did, saw, heard or witnessed. While only a selection of images could be featured in the curated archive, all images submitted through #MassIsolationAus are available to view online. Existing technologies made this project possible as the community could document and share experiences from home unlike during Mass Observation in 1937. It is worth noting that, despite such advances, some challenges remain for those whose access to technology may be limited. Therefore, such a project which aims to document the lives of the masses during a

pandemic continues to be an ambitious undertaking.

As of December 2020, more than 12,000 photographs have been submitted to this project from people around Australia. Common threads of representation appear throughout the project, ebbing and flowing like the pandemic itself: the initial fear, the panic of lockdown, then settling into life at home; Easing of restriction and the worries of recurrent waves of infection; Portraits through windows and doorways draw attention to living life from a distance; Shots of empty public spaces and train stations usually full of commuters now bare imply the shift towards an at-home way of living; Signs and street art depict messages of advice and hope portraying methods of dealing with anxiety and loneliness.

Though it is the first time most of us are experiencing such a global crisis, it is not the first time the world has faced a pandemic. Over 100 years ago the world was confronted with a similar scenario – the Spanish Flu outbreak. The first case of Spanish Flu appeared in Australia in January 1919.[4] To contain the outbreak, various states implemented their own set of measures, not unlike the present day, such as the closure of schools, places of entertainment and regulating the use of masks.[5] The Spanish Flu also came in waves, ravaged humanity, and took away millions of lives just as COVID-19 has disrupted all forms of normalcy. Familiarity transformed into uncertainty, and this sudden event has once again placed us in the grips of a virus that changed not only the way we are living and working but altered the way we interact with one another a century on. Globally, over 71 million people have contracted COVID-19 and more than 1.6 million people have tragically lost their lives, a figure that unfortunately continues to rise. [6] [SM1] [SHK2] Not to mention the extended and long-lasting financial, environmental, and emotional effects the pandemic is and will continue to have on society.

In light of these outcomes, the internet mill has been full of memes and commentary, referring to this year using phrases such as “2020 is cancelled”. But is 2020 truly cancelled or has it just been put on a long pause? Is waiting impatiently for life to go back to ‘normal’ really what we should want? The changes forced upon us this year have compelled us into retrospection and contemplation, whether we like it or not. It would be a great pity if we let the pandemic pass without using such experiences to create lasting knowledge and change, working towards a more equitable society. If we do not embrace and learn from what the pandemic has shown us, then we are at risk of missing one of the most globally expansive

opportunities for change and collaboration that we have experienced in years.

The world before COVID-19 moved at such a rapid pace. Everything seemed to be on steroids – material items were becoming cheaper and produced faster, and services constantly attempted to increase productivity and efficiency. Our society persistently strived to improve and advance. Where bigger and better, cheaper and faster seemed to be the motto of the day. However, fast actions can be problematic. There is an assumption of a guaranteed way of doing things, a short cut even, ever-hastening productivity. In 2014, The Irish Times released an article urging schools to introduce philosophy into their curriculum, contesting a consumerist society that “attempts to remove time for reflection”. [7] This techno-consumerist age likewise encourages additional slogans such as “Just do it”, and “YOLO”, inciting us to act now and think later. Like the introduction of philosophy was a need and not a luxury, *Mass Isolation Australia* hopes to provide a platform for this type of deliberation and reflection, one that works against the currents of a consumerist society that attempts to remove time for thought and consideration.

As the effects of the pandemic began seeping into our daily lives, people were mandated to go into isolation, forced to not always act but reflect, to pare back from all the unnecessary elements in life, and only focus on the most important and simpler aspects. As individual priorities changed, family time seemed more important than ever, time spent commuting to work was exchanged with more restful sleep, and instead of spending money on drinks at the bar after work, one had to learn to appreciate the beauty of staying at home. Air conditions improved in many major cities as traffic trickled down to the bare minimum and the skies turned blue again.[8] An optimist would think, perhaps the world is healing and, even though this pause has hurt many of us, it could be beneficial in many ways. The challenges that emerged from the pandemic highlighted some of the pitfalls of our fast-paced lives and, optimist or not, there is something we can all take from that.

While many cities around the world went into lockdown, people adapted, got creative, innovated, and found novel ways of engagement. Businesses started seeing the importance of digitisation efforts as they rushed to reach out to consumers and audiences online in a time of physical distancing. New modes of working together were introduced in place of physical interactions and Zoom calls filled up our schedules for the day. This state of

calls filled up our schedules for the day. This state of creating methods of adaptation is expressed in the Italian word, *Arrangiarsi*, encompassing the art of improvisation and overcoming obstacles. [9] *Arrangiarsi* takes on the Italian inclination to uncover solutions in an intimate space and goes beyond the English meaning of 'making do'. We cannot expect life to return to our old normal, thus we must remain open to new possibilities that take time – to preserve our valuable past and forge new diverse, equitable and sustainable approaches for the present and our future new normal.

In order to overcome an ordeal, it is important to rewire one's perspective. Claudia Hammond, a writer on the subject of time, explains that "Time perception matters because it is the experience of time that roots us in our mental reality". [10] Instead of sticking to old routines, introducing new ways of working can open up participation in society in a more just way than productivity-before-all-else allows. Even though small businesses, people living alone, those with mental illness, and many others are facing multitudes of trials and challenges, they also demonstrate the way society can continuously re-invent and adapt to evolving environments. We do not have to cancel 2020 but instead switch our perspective and take advantage of what it has shown us, even if we can understandably, not always see it at the time. We built *Mass Isolation Australia* together as a shared memory, a fluid and continuous act of creation that acknowledges a myriad of emotions, allowing this important year to be considered carefully from numerous angles and perspectives. [SM3] [SHK4]

Presenting multiple viewpoints, producing opportunities for change, and materials for future learning is something the arts industry is well-positioned to undertake. As art and theatre shows face postponement or disruption, it has become our duty to reassess and ask ourselves if more justifiable and sustainable ways are available to make and share the work we do in the arts. Part of the social responsibility of an arts organisation is also to continually create access to forms of artistic expression. *Mass Isolation Australia* sought to establish a space for widespread artistic and distanced participation. Despite the physical disconnection that COVID-19 has brought us, it also serves as a timely reminder conveying that we are still so ever-connected. The arts are a way to bring moments where lightness and care can be felt when we all come together as a community, whether it be through a digital arts festival, online artist talks or physically distanced street theatre. [SM5] [11]

Using the medium of photography to represent and reflect upon the challenging time we continue to face has not only documented the pandemic but provided a digital space for a community of shared experiences. The nature of this global crisis indicates a largely private experience, yet having spaces like *Mass Isolation Australia*, to share within a wider digital platform, established a sense of comradeship. Moreover, the process of taking the photograph itself can be beneficial in processing and coping with this difficult time and the stresses involved. Sharing photographs can provide a sense of self and purpose in a time when many are emotionally vulnerable. The act of taking a photograph gives the opportunity to actively engage in the situation and, through the power of photography, establish acceptance and connection with others.

Photography is a powerful medium for people to express themselves and to be engaged with the current crisis. Importantly, it is used as a tool to remember this period of mass isolation. Endel Tulving, a Canadian neuroscientist, reminds us that the deed of remembering is akin to that of imagining the future through what he terms as Episodic Memory. He suggests that this enables us to traverse any period of our memory to revisit a moment of our choice. [12] This mental reliving of past events is critical to the transformative nature of our lives, providing us with an opportunity to foresee potential results founded on past ones and hence be equipped for what the future may create.

In a time when slogans like 'In This Together' were used to rally a universal support effort, working together and for each other is more important than ever. Depicting sentiments of unity is vital and so is having sensitivity to the wide range of personal experiences. The pandemic is something that does not discriminate, and everyone is susceptible. However, real differences exist in the way people have and are still experiencing the global crisis based on their circumstances and lived experiences. Some have lost jobs, homes, or possibly loved ones. Others have faced mental health challenges, difficulties accessing care or caring for others, or have been trying to adjust to working and learning from home. The reality of this crisis is at once both universal and highly personal. We are all experiencing it differently and will remember it uniquely in the future.

In a way, it seems premature to be reflecting on the pandemic while we are still currently experiencing it, as we cannot fully predict in what ways this health crisis will shape society to come. There are, and continues to be, many who face health-related, financial and other pressures and challenges, and the crisis has led many to

consider their lifestyles and what is essential and important to them. At the beginning of the year, few would have predicted what was in store for the world, but there is something to learn in the most challenging and unusual of times, such as these. It often seems like the world is waiting with bated breath to get back to 'normal'. But is this something we should be aiming for, or should we take this as an opportunity to create foundations for positive, lasting change? The pandemic has given us a crucial opportunity to re-evaluate not only what is important to us as individuals but how we can operate as a more compassionate and sustainable cohort of people living on this earth. 2020 has been a tough and truly bizarre year for everyone, but it needn't be deemed as a *cancelled* year. While we rethink and re-evaluate the social values of various occupations and businesses we may have once thought were of less importance, and as many people and businesses continue to struggle, the rest of us can continue our service to each other and our collective future through generosity and compassion.

[1] Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective: Case Studies from contemporary art*. (Chicester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 106.

[2] "@massisolationFORMAT take part", Format Festival, accessed October, 2020, <https://formatfestival.com/whats-on/massisolation>

[3] Nick Hubble, *Mass Observation, and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

[4] J.H.L Cumpston, *Influenza and maritime quarantine in Australia* (Melbourne: Albert J. Mullett, Government Printer, 1919), 144.

[5] Cumpston, *Influenza*, 161-164.

[6] "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard", World Health Organization, accessed 16 December 2020, <https://covid19.who.int/>

[7] Robert Grant, "Philosophy in our schools a necessity, not a luxury", The Irish Times, published October 21, 2014, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/philosophy-in-our-schools-a-necessity-not-a-luxury-1.970408>

[8] Emma Newburger and Adam Jeffery, "Photos show impact of temporary air pollution drops across the world from coronavirus lockdown", CNBC, published April 23, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/23/coronavirus-photos-show-effect-of-air-pollution-drops-from-global-lockdown.html>

[9] Linda Falcone, "Arrangiarsi", *The Florentine*, published March 8, 2007, <https://www.theflorentine.net/2007/03/08/arrangiarsi/>

[10] Claudia Hammond, *Time Warped: Unlocking the Mysteries of Time Perception* (Edinburgh and London: Canongate, 2012), 9.

[11] Alice Fisher, "World's first virtual design festival launches in response to Covid-19", *The Guardian*, published 10 April 2020; Kate Streader, "The physical theatre troupe are spreading socially-distanced joy with their daily dance performances", *Beat*, 18 September 2020.

[12] Dan Falk, *In Search of Time: The History, Physics and Philosophy of Time* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2010).

Shaohui Kwok

Shaohui Kwok is a cultural producer with an interest in the structures of exhibition-making. She has worked in various artistic and creative environments presenting projects across Asia-Pacific. She completed a Master of Art Curatorship this year at the University of Melbourne. Most recently, she has been co-curating *Mass Isolation Australia* (2020-), an initiative under the Ballarat International Foto Biennale, creating an on-going visual archive of mass isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is currently a research associate at Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design, Media investigating on systems of archiving exhibitions, and was selected to participate in the inaugural Curatorial (Case) Studies programme presented by Objectifs – Centre for Photography & Film.

Amelia Saward

Amelia is a curator, writer and artist based in Melbourne. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Art History and is studying a Master of Art Curatorship at the University of Melbourne. She has a particular interest in the relationship between art and social change, feminist art practices and photography that explores socio-political themes. She was a featured illustrator in *Drawn Volume.3* (Capsules Books) and is a former recipient of the Miegunyah Project Award from the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Amelia has co-curated and exhibited in exhibitions across Melbourne, including with the Melbourne Fringe Festival, Noir Darkroom, George Paton Gallery and Brunswick Street Gallery.

