

W O R K



under the *pandemic*

December 2020
By Sherry C. Liu

Work has become more difficult

more forced

more busy

more sedentary

more unbearable

more complicated

for many.

And maybe, also for you.

Many artists are facing difficulties to continue working.

- I spend roughly 9 hours a day now staring into a laptop. This is giving me headaches, and eye twitching, and my vision is perfectly fine. I have concluded that it takes 2 to 3 hours to fall asleep after closing my laptop even if it is already 1 am because I feel so wired, and wake up the next day exhausted regardless of how long I slept in for. Digital school is most definitely making me sick.

Since the summer term from last semester, I've been doing online learning for more than three months, since then I've been sleeping irregularly. Due to the twelve time difference between Canada and China, I usually sleeps between 12 pm to 5 am, so now despite I get away from my laptop in the midnight, I couldn't easily fall asleep until around 5 o'clock, even with the help of melatonin pills, when I close my eyes, I will be brainstorming about course materials and upcoming works. I don't think I have a healthy routine now, waking up at twelve to one in the afternoon, and had to get the thickest curtain to ensure not being bothered by daylight. Ironically, the course materials would wake me up for sure everyday and it can be quite unpleasant, I feel like I can't tell between day and night anymore and it definitely slowed down my brain. And because of all the works are done online due to the pandemic, I had to sit in front of my computer for mostly the whole day, when I get off from my working table, I could hear my back joints and bone popping from the stress. I'm much looking forward to get back to Canada for a normal healthier schedule.

Anonymous, *A Call for Complaint: For Plague Speech, for Sick Speech*, 2020. Excerpts.¹

Through publication, artists are establishing communal care to address the challenges experienced by one another. One of the examples is the [Urgency Reader 2: Mutual Aid Publishing During Crisis](#) on Queer.Archive.Work, an open call to document experiences under the pandemic and to provide relief for artists and writers. [A Call for Complaint: For Plague Speech, for Sick Speech](#), started by a group of students at the University of Toronto, is also a response to this initiative.

¹ Excerpts from [A Call for Complaint: For Plague Speech, for Sick Speech](#), accessed November 27, 2020.
NOTE: Please open all hyperlinks in new tabs throughout the publication.

Artists and art institutions are adapting to the change through different means, depending on their current conditions and local travel restrictions.

Let's go!

Join me on a trip to take a peek into how artists and art institutions are working and changing their works the pandemic.

I visited the Art Museum at the University of Toronto on November 11, 2020 to see how the gallery experience has changed for visitors and the institution.

They wrote on their website:

“The 2020 exhibition, which was originally scheduled to occur in spring, opened at the Art Museum on October 28 and will continue until November 21. Anyone who wants to visit the exhibition must pre-register for a time slot, and then obey the university’s health and safety policies (including mandatory face mask usage) while on site.”²

I booked a time slot on their official website a week in advance. Upon arrival, I was asked to fill out an online health self-assessment before entering the gallery.

I stayed in the gallery for more than an hour to go through the entire exhibition.

² This information was posted on the [Official Website](#) of the Daniels Faculty at the University of Toronto, at which the student artists and curators of the exhibition are Master of Visual Studies graduates.

For the entirety of my visit, I was the only visitor in the space.



Brandon Poole, *Dry Dwellers of Eternity (Carla's Island)*, 2020. Gallery view at The Art Museum. Photo: Sherry C. Liu.



Xiaojing Yan, *Far from when you divined*, 2017. Gallery view at The Art Museum. Photo: Sherry C. Liu.

Student artists and curators who have been preparing for their end-of-year show for the duration of their studies became uncertain and concerned due to lockdowns. They eventually managed to put together the show and have it open to the public for a short duration of time.

When it is impossible for galleries to welcome visitors, the accessibility and the significance of in-person exhibitions become questioned.

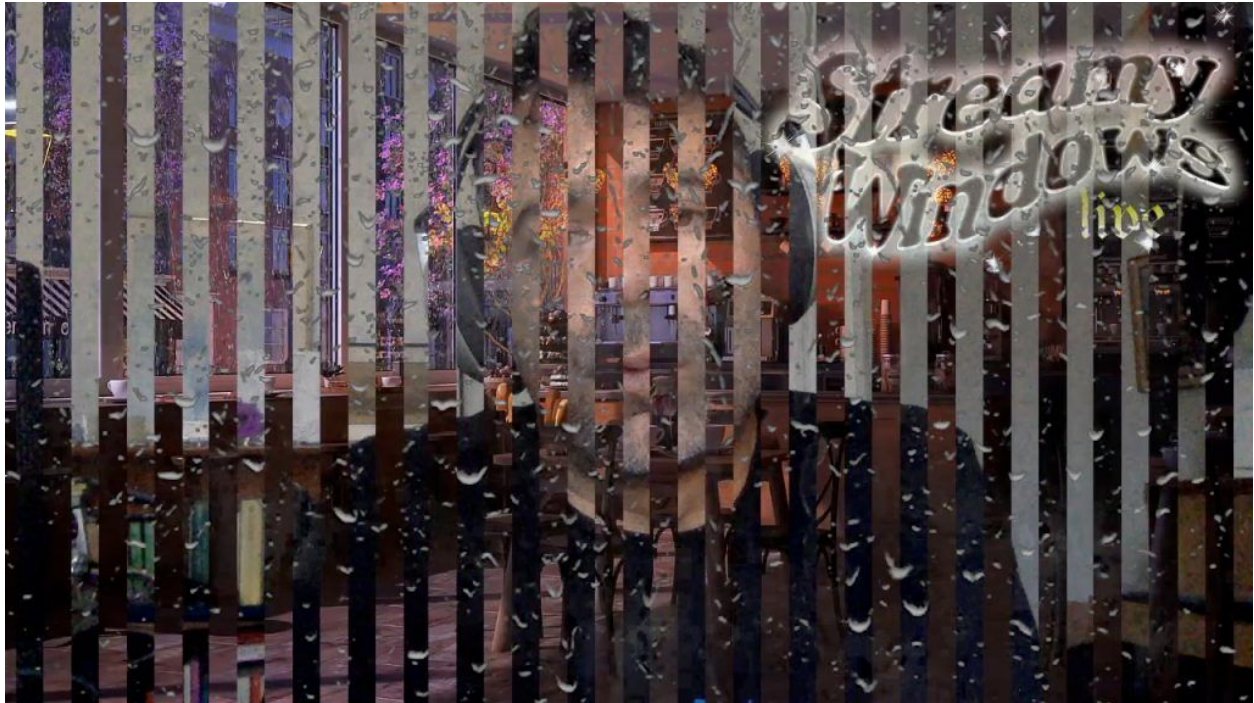
Without online resources to access the gallery (such as images and 3D online visits), the show is practically inaccessible to a majority of potential audiences. However, the exhibition is not intended to be experienced online. Even if documented online, there will be elements and/or details missing or misinterpreted through the digital translation (or the failure thereof) of the physical gallery space.

Artists and curators started to address this issue in their new works.



Immaterial Architecture (online), October 29 – November 19, 2020. The Art Museum.

[Immaterial Architecture \(online\)](#) is a new series of commissioned projects for the screen-space, featuring works by Maïder Fortuné and Annie MacDonell, Oliver Husain, Jon Sasaki, and Skawennati.



Oliver Husain, *Streamy Windows*. Logo by Charlton Diaz. Courtesy of the artist.³

When artworks are intended to be experienced through the screen-space, they are less likely to lose their details of experience as being accessed on screen outside of gallery spaces.

Artists continue to produce works with a conscious utilization and exploration of digital platforms, and in some cases, pivot to target topics that are more directly related to the social issues and crises in light of the pandemic.

³ [Streamy Windows](#) by Oliver Husain is a part of *Immaterial Architecture* (online).

Still with me?

Let's visit some more places to explore
WORK under the pandemic

[Click here](#) to follow the next **trips**

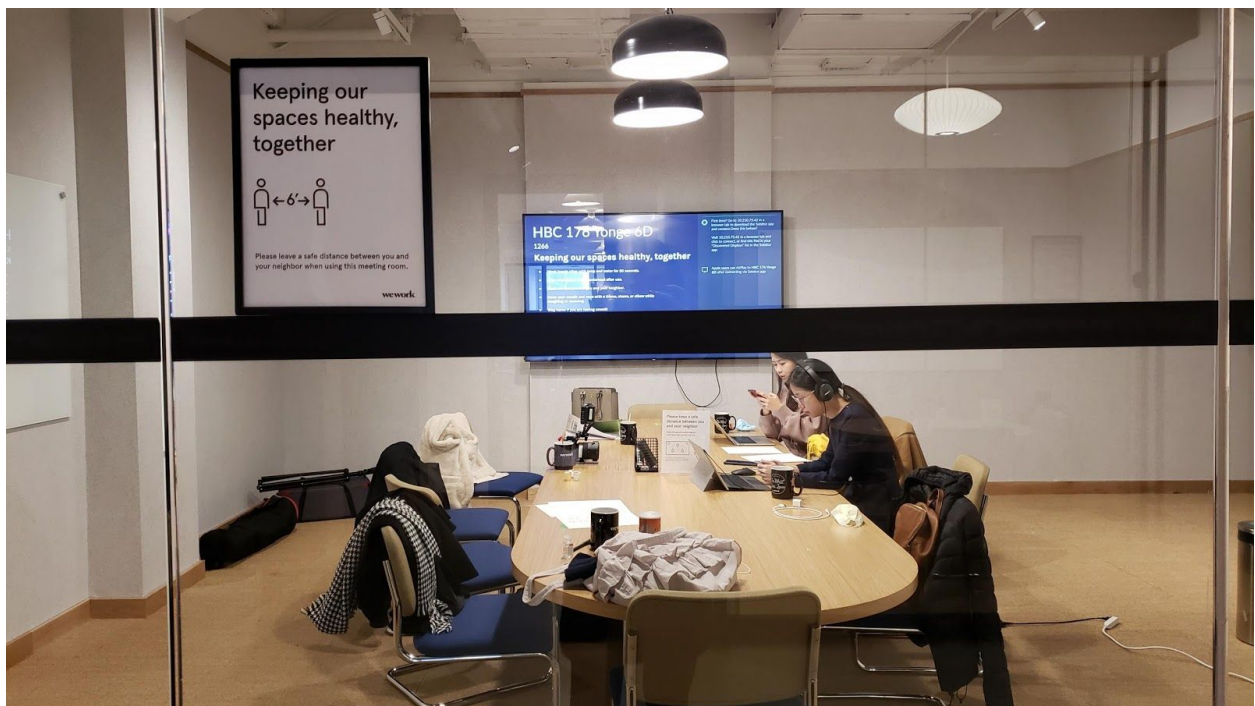
(You can choose to [click here](#) to see more artworks in response to the pandemic
but you will miss the trips)

WORK outside of home (by choice)

I shadowed the work of an entrepreneur of a small start-up to see how they are responding to the pandemic.

Cindy and her assistant Yiyi go to a common work space from around 10am to 6pm, Monday to Friday.

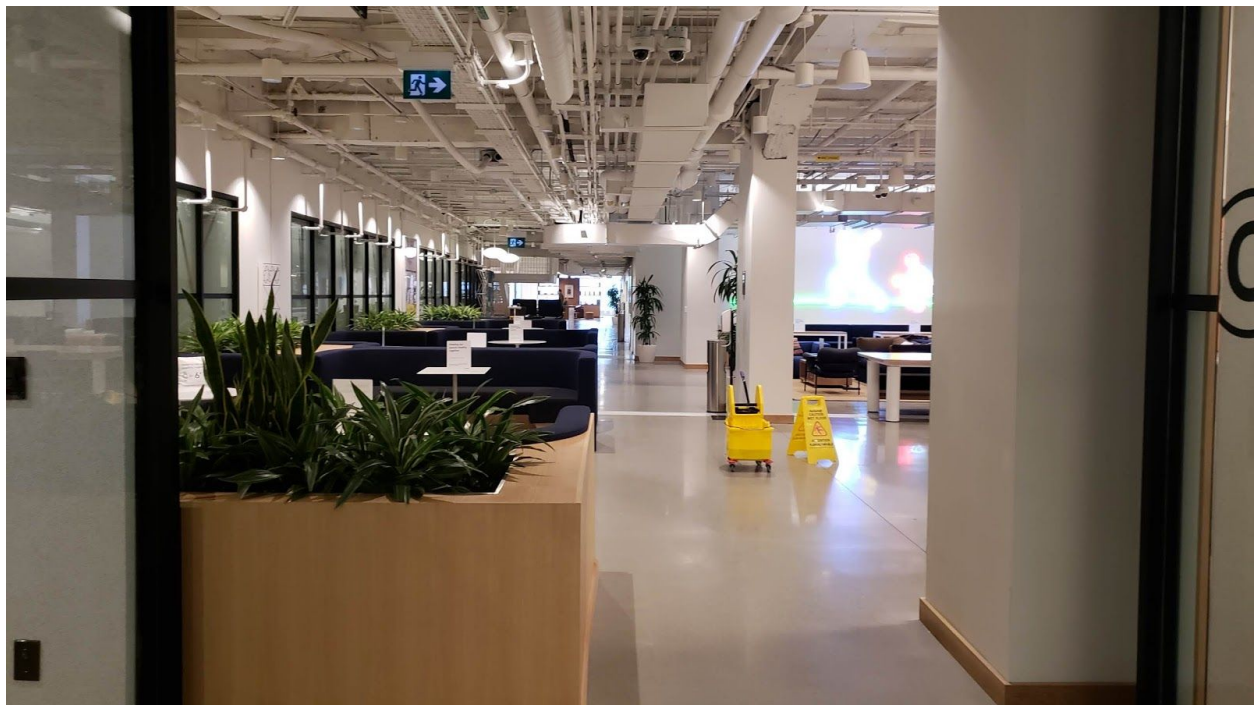
After they arrived at the office, they wiped down all furniture surfaces with alcohol clothes, then carefully took out their computers.



Cindy and her assistant Yiyi in the office. Photo: Sherry C. Liu

“Wear a mask whenever you are in the hallway. Do not take it off until you are in the office,” she told me.

“OK, for sure.”



Empty hallway at the common working space. Photo: Sherry C. Liu

Working in the office helps them keep each other accountable for their one-year-old mental health start-up.

“Our company will continue the remote working mode even after the pandemic. Teletherapy used to be one of the therapy options, but now, it is the best option -- and the only option -- to help clients during the pandemic.”

However
This is a privilege.

“We’re aware that it is extremely lucky for us to be able to switch most of our work online before the pandemic hits. ***But we cannot stop working.*** The discussion around mental health became more of a focus during the pandemic. We need to contribute our part. ”

“Also, if we stop working,” she adds, “the company wouldn’t survive.”

I observed that besides Cindy and her assistant, a few other entrepreneurs would also go to the space to work. Everyone would choose to work in a different room, separate from one another. Outside of their office rooms, they never take off their masks.

...

What does WORK mean under the pandemic?

For those who are lucky, their work modes can be a choice, and can be adapted in response to the circumstance.

However, the necessity to work is less of a choice.

But has it ever been a choice?

...

Linda works at a cargo handling service company in Vancouver, Canada.

Located across from the country, I asked her to bring me on a virtual “trip to work” by telling me about some of the details of her work and her thoughts through an online call and some photographs.



Picking up animals from the airport. Photo: Linda.

WORK at the frontline

This day, some animals were being unloaded from the airplane after long hours of traveling. Linda's supervisor brought her to pick up the animals from the airport.

"Because this job cannot be done remotely from home, for our warehouse and office staff, everyone is extremely cautious at work. Masks are worn at all times."

I asked her if she has ever thought of quitting under the pandemic; she answered:

"Yes.

But honestly, most people don't have a choice at our position. If they quit, they will have no other ways of supporting themselves or their families. For me, most of the pressure comes from financial pressure and the anxiety of not having work."

However, these pressures are not dominating Linda and her co-workers' minds. She told me that even though there are safety concerns, they are mostly working calmly under the situation. This also made her become more reflective of the importance of her job, and her values within the job.

"I can feel a big change in my working mentality compared to before the pandemic. I used to feel that my job was a way of making money and nothing more, but now, i feel a great sense of responsibility at this frontline position."



Linda's office view. Photo from online.

“I became more reflective and conscious of the ways that our working methods can be improved in this industry. For example, automation for data entry and management would be able to eliminate human errors so much more effectively, which would be extremely beneficial for the pandemic situation. But for now, everything is done manually.”

Linda's workload has improved during the pandemic due to the company's cutting down employees. However, she ended the call leaving this note with me:

"Whenever animals arrive at our office, I feel so healed and happy. I have learned to find joy in small things like this at work to lighten up my mood while doing a highly repetitive job. This is thanks to the pandemic."



Kitty at the office. Photo: Linda.

Through the adjustments of working methods, Cindy and Linda started to think more about the details, potential improvements, downsides, advantages, privileges, and the future of their modes of working.

Reflections alike extended (as they should have) to the explorations and reflections of artists.

In the [We Are Together 2020](#) publication, many artists shared their stories through drawings, paintings, video art, and writings. As the editor, I quickly noticed that many of the stories behind the works do not belong to the artists themselves, but rather they were of tribute to the marginalized and frontline workers who are risking their lives just to provide normality for the rest of us.



Mrinalini, *Untitled*, 2020. Featured in the We Are Together 2020 Publication and Online Gallery.

Calls to helplines have increased five-fold in some countries as rates of reported intimate partner violence increase because of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). Restricted movement, social isolation, and economic insecurity are increasing women's vulnerability to violence in the home around the world [\[2\]](#).

By September 2020, 48 countries had integrated prevention and response to violence against women and girls into COVID-19 response plans, and 121 countries had adopted measures to strengthen services for women survivors of violence during the global crisis, but more efforts are urgently needed [\[3\]](#).

UN Women, excerpt from *"Facts and figures: Ending violence against women"*⁴.

Through online platforms, artists are sharing and delivering their works, giving voices to those who need it, who should be given more attention by the society.

⁴ Marinalini's illustration work [Untitled](#), featured in the first We Are Together 2020 [publication](#) and [online gallery](#), brings awareness to the impact of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. [This report by UN Women](#) has shown a drastic increase of violence against women and need for help during the pandemic.



Libelula Inc., *SIMCOE 3:60*, video, 2020. Featured in the We Are Together 2020 Publication and Online Gallery.⁵

As addressed by some artworks and artists, it has become more and more difficult to continue working. Traditional art institutions and practices are facing crises of losing visitors and opportunities. Many of us have been forced to pause our original plans and switch to a different way of working at home. This change poses resistance on our workflow, creativity, and mental and physical health.

However, when looking at frontline workers such as [Linda](#) and many others⁶, we realize that this pause is a privilege to a large degree.

For artists, it can also be a blessing.

It is time for us to pause and reflect on what we can contribute to those who need help.

⁵ Click on image to watch *SIMCOE 3:60*, a nostalgic reflexión of the events lived during COVID-19, seeking to draw a collective consciousness with regards to the possibilities ahead of the pandemic.

⁶ [Click here](#) to see more stories of frontline workers on the We Are Together 2020 [online gallery](#).

For those of us who are lucky enough to work from home or to choose the way we work - Yes. Work may have become more difficult

more forced

more busy

more sedentary

more unbearable

more complicated

However

WORK has also become more important

more socially conscious

more self-aware

more reflective

more responsibility-driven

under the pandemic

(even more so for those with more privileges).

It is through the difficulties, we reflect, create, do our best, help others, and thrive.

END

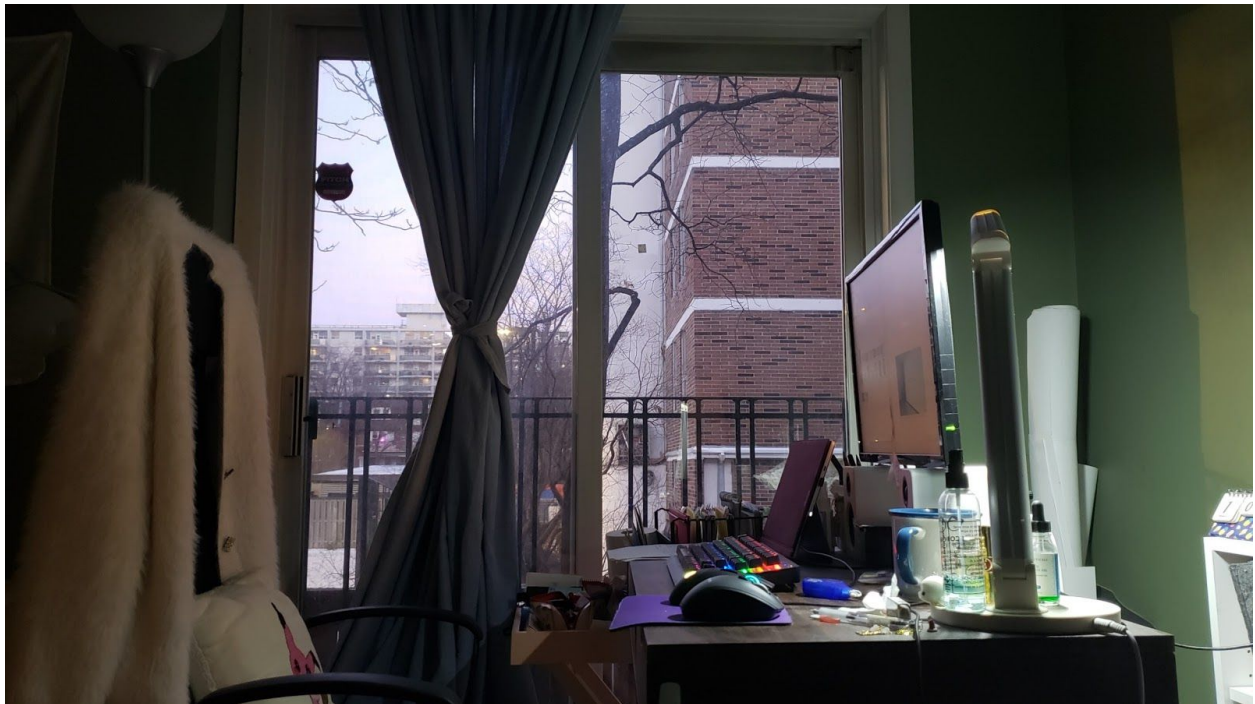
A **thank you** to those who are continuing to work under the pandemic.

Thank **YOU** for reading and joining me on this journey thinking about **WORK** under the pandemic.

Special thanks to Cindy and Linda for sharing their work processes and reflections.

About the author:

Sherry C. Liu is the director of [We Are Together 2020](#) and a Visual Studies student at the University of Toronto. As an aspiring writer and artist, she focuses her research on exploring the role of art in representing the voices of marginalized groups. Her current research revolves around contemporary artworks by artists such as Adrian Piper, Cauleen Smith, and Rebecca Belmore.



Bedroom Working Area, taken while working on this publication in December 2020. Photo: Sherry C. Liu.