

EDITORIAL:

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Visual studies is a rapidly expanding field – as we have emphasised in our previous Editorials, and whose dynamics will continue to be addressed in this journal. One of the aims of *Visual Studies* is to bridge the gap between visually based research across the spectrum of the social sciences, arts, and humanities. We also seek to reduce the disparity in emphasis between visual and written studies in scholarly research by promoting visual methods as a legitimate form of scholarly work and to enrich the development of visual research methodologies in all their various forms.

This is our first issue composed entirely of visual essays. In future issues, the visual essay will remain a regular feature, alongside traditional academic articles. The visual essay is still a contentious form of visual research, yet one with the arguably unique potential to draw together a variety of forms of disciplinary scholarship, through its ‘dynamic and hybrid character ... as a scholarly practice’ (Pauwels 2012, n.p.). Thirty years ago, one of us (Grady 1991) argued for the importance of the visual essay for the future development of visual sociology and visual studies. This, he asserted, was ‘not despite, but because [the visual essay] is a medium for artistic expression.’ However, in 2021, social scientists remain wary of the aesthetic power of the visual essay, which is still often automatically yet unproductively pitted against its empirical capacities.

The essays in this volume explore both the aesthetic and empirical – the art and the science – of the visual essay, through media including photography, drawing and multiple exposure filmmaking. There is considerable diversity in the approaches to the visual essay form taken by the authors herein. Some visual essays are anchored by traditional explanatory captioning and descriptive text, while others explore the sensory and experiential or expressive potentials of the genre, especially as a medium for auto-ethnographic reflection.

The thematic focus of this special issue is the global pandemic and its ongoing social, economic and emotional impact. Covid-19 has profoundly altered the ways in which we have all lived our lives over the past year, and visually engaged scholars have been at the forefront of documenting and analysing the impact of Covid-19 and the widespread public health measures that were swiftly imposed on entire populations.

During the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, the imposition of lockdown, quarantine, and shelter in place orders meant that people's daily movements were abruptly and radically restricted in many countries around the world in an attempt to 'flatten the curve' and slow the transmission of the virus. In practice, this meant that many people found themselves indefinitely confined to the domestic sphere. Brent Luvaas' visual essay, 'Smudged Windows: Scenes from Home During a Pandemic' explores the emotional complexity of the lived experience of being suddenly restricted to the suburban home. Tara Pixely's contribution, 'Reframing the Homescape: Documenting Domesticity During Photography's COVID Turn' is also focused on the domestic sphere. She investigates the ways in which the homescape was documented by photojournalists during the pandemic, with a particular focus on female photographers' representations of Covid-19.

Another major social change experienced by many in upper middle-income countries during the pandemic was the rapid adoption of digital forms of interaction for daily social, professional and educational interactions. Ioana Literat's, 'Mememes in the Time of Corona: An Autoethnographic Visual Essay on Memes as Relational Resources during the COVID-19 Pandemic', explores the ways in which Covid-19 memes operated in online space to enable novel forms of sense-making and social connection in these precarious times.

The pandemic also impacted on the ways in which people negotiated public space and physical forms of social interaction. Mask wearing was recommended, then mandated, by many governments. However, differing cultural attitudes meant that while countries with an existing tradition of mask wearing readily adopted these recommendations, there was considerable resistance to mask wearing in other countries, with some responding to this measure as an infringement on civil liberties. Baldwin Van Gorp's visual essay, 'Face Masks as Floating Signifiers During the COVID-19 Pandemic' adopts a method of research-based drawings to show how masks were adopted – and resisted – in Belgium, a country which has one of the world's highest per capita fatality rates.

Outdoor spaces were also altered in ways that reflected people's responses to the governmental handling of the pandemic. Holly Eva Ryan's visual essay, 'The Political Work of Graffiti During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A View from Tottenham, London' documents the political graffiti produced during the UK's first lockdown. This essay tracks the shifts in popular opinion visible in the graffiti on the streets of Tottenham, North London. Similarly, Megan Hicks' contribution, 'Flyposter graffiti and the change in a Sydney streetscape during the time of COVID-19' explores changes in the graffiti on an Australian streetscape during the pandemic. The flyposters she examines range from commentary on government inadequacy to the promotion of Covid-19 conspiracy theories. Notably, Hicks also documents people's interactions with these posters, and their attempts to rip down, cross out, or otherwise contest their messages.

Significant socio-economic changes were also visible in public space, as many non-essential businesses were forced to close for long periods of time. Guy Eldar and Shani Eldar's visual essay 'Out of Business: A visualisation of financial distress in the public space amidst Covid-19 pandemic' explores the economic distress that was palpable in public space through their documentation of the empty streets and for rent signs that now dominate a once bustling and prosperous strip in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Depending on the level of public health restrictions in place, some businesses were permitted to open during the pandemic, but under new regulations which entailed novel spatial configurations and practices designed to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus. Based on ethnographic and visual fieldwork, Patch and colleagues', 'Coffee + COVID: People, Place, and Pandemic' examines the ways in which customers in American coffee shops oriented to a 'modified normalcy' in response to these new public health measures.

The Covid-19 pandemic also provoked the widespread cancellation and postponement of public events, including festivals, concerts and sporting fixtures. While some events were rapidly translated to digital formats that could be engaged with remotely, others proved more challenging to adapt. Indeed, some sporting events were not cancelled, but were rather conducted in isolation behind 'closed doors' with special regulations in place. Vidar Halldorsson's visual essay, 'An international football match experienced from within a working quarantine' gives a visual auto-ethnographical account of a match between the Swedish and Icelandic women's football teams that demonstrates the new norms of behaviour that emerged in the social reorganisation of the game.

The final essay in this issue provides a markedly aesthetic response. Christina Lammer's 'Stitches in the Heart: A Small History of Scars' is based on her sensory ethnographic research and a process of multiple exposure filmmaking. This arts-based visual essay explores the atmospheres evoked during the pandemic in a range of environments, including the surgical operating theatre, the urban environment, and the home.

The cover image for this issue is drawn from Brent Luvaas' visual essay. Here, Luvaas aims to capture 'something of the emotional complexity of lockdown, its irreducibility and singularity, its fraught affective atmosphere not easily represented in either images or words.' Please see our instructions for authors if you are interested in submitting a visual essay for a future issue of *Visual Studies*.

'Smudged Windows.' Photograph © Brent Luvaas, 2021



Finally, we deeply regret the recent passing of Marcus Banks. Marcus was an influential and inspirational scholar. We have invited Howard Morphy to contribute a memorial to this issue.

REFERENCES

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