



The Resurrection of Art and Human Dignity

MAGNETS Case Study

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Abstract. To overcome social isolation and complete art production standstill, during the Covid-19 outbreak we chose the “blue pill” (The Matrix, 1999) in favour of an artificial, digital space where we transferred most of our activities and practices. Building on the idea that participating in artistic endeavours has a positive impact on psychological well-being and health and is a very good model to tackle current social challenges, we ran MAGNETS a collaborative art project in the digital realm. Through online interviews with the artists who participated in the MAGNETS project, we have discovered a powerful link between art and human dignity. In this paper, we argue that participation in collaborative artistic creation through the digital realm is a process that restores and reaffirms human dignity and contributes to “social healing”. We also call for more exploration of collaborative art in the digital realm as it offers a safe space where aesthetics is experienced through the process of creation and as a functional solution to a specific social problem.

Keywords: collaborative art · human dignity · aesthetics

1 Introduction

The onset of the worldwide Covid-19 outbreak introduced us to an unprecedented situation of isolation, depriving us of a basic human need: socialization. In such a grave situation, scared to get close to another human being, we self-isolated ourselves to be safe or to protect others. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic had led to a series of restrictive measures of lockdowns for societal life in various countries. Almost all European countries decreed a ban on mass gatherings, which covered cultural events and caused a complete standstill of public, physically present cultural life. With the collapse of artistic production, or “the death of art by covid-19” as Terrone [1] names it, we have experienced feelings of humiliation and a lack of human dignity [2].

We fully accept that the discussion on human dignity in literature is long and the quest for the definition of human dignity is quite complex. However, what we all agree upon is that “human dignity is a fundamental value of the human being” [3]. Another important aspect of the experience of human dignity where the scientific literature converges is that the idea of human dignity relies on social integration and connection with others.

Human dignity is fulfilled through our bonds with others, our fellow human beings. As Shapiro-Phim [4] argues by quoting Lerner Febres [5] the experience of an isolated individual is directly affecting human dignity.

To overcome social isolation and the death of art, during the Covid-19 outbreak, as a society, we have opted for the “blue pill” (The Matrix, 1999) in favour of an artificial, digital space where we transferred most of our activities and practices [1]. Following the idea that dealing with arts is an important predictor of psychological well-being and health [6, 7], in this paper we argue that participation in collaborative artistic creation through the digital realm is a process that restores and reaffirms human dignity and contributes to “social healing” [8]. Also, we argue that collaborative art in the digital realm offers space where aesthetics is experienced through the process of creation and as a functional solution to a specific social problem [9].

2 MAGNETS – A Collaborative Art Project

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Swedish authorities did not comply with WHO recommendations [10] and Sweden became notorious for implementing the less restrictive approach, a “Swedish way” or so-called “Swedish experiment” [11], that is and was based entirely on the recommendations of the Swedish Public Health Agency (PHA) (Folkhälsomyndigheten). Facing the pandemic in a unique “Swedish way” did not introduce artists who reside in Sweden to more chances to perform. They were, like the majority of artists in the rest of the world, without the opportunity to perform as mass gatherings in Sweden were banned. The introduction of this unusual and severe crisis of cultural life just exposed unsustainable practices of cultural funding [12]. Even one year later after the pandemic, the economic loss of the cultural industry remains at an elevated level [13].

During this period, many of us in Europe sought new forms of collaboration and solidarity. Unfortunately, in such a grave situation, the European Continent was again split by traditional notions of nations and local interests, along with their related fears. This is how one professional artist described the current situation:

“I feel so helpless, disconnected. The world is getting crazy, what is going on?! And in the middle of this, I can not perform. My job is taken away from me! I can’t express my feelings or contribute to some change. We should do something!” (Personal communication with professional dancer, April 2020).

We have talked with artists based in Europe and many of them have reported similar feelings. One of them, the artist residing in the South of Europe expressed this as follows below:

“This is humiliating. I feel like we are all locked in small metal cells to stay there for the rest of our lives. The art is dead. We are dead! We are not humans” (personal communication with visual artist, April 2020).

Looking at again divided Europe again, we decided to invite some of the artists we talked to for artistic collaboration. Our idea was to reach out, regain agency to act and do art, and see what artistic collaboration in the digital realm will produce. We have decided to challenge one of the oldest European divisions: the separation of north and south, including the division of “cold” and “warm” prejudice. Aiming to challenge our

traditional forms of inquiry, we called on artistic practices to help us understand what kind of society we hoped to wake up to after the pandemic was over.

We sent an invitation from “Mrs Europe” to six artists residing in Northern Europe to collaborate with six artists residing in Southern Europe. The artists had never met before and came from different disciplines. In accepting this collaboration with the unknown, we created MAGNETS (<https://magnets.cloud/>), a non-profit collaborative art project that includes 12 artists, of different artistic backgrounds, and three organization members based in Barcelona, Athens, Marseille, Belgrade, Gothenburg, Helsinki, and Berlin (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Geographical distribution of participants of the MAGNETS project

Working in the North and South of Europe, we see our collaborative energy as a strong magnetic field between the Magnets. And just as everything has been turned upside down by the pandemic, so are the colours of our Magnets. We deliberately switched the colours used in physics to emphasize our focus on the old cliché of “cold north” (blue) and “warm south” (red).

To deconstruct longstanding north-south European divisions, and to understand how we are to communicate and collaborate over national borders, languages, and cultures with people we have never met, we created random north-south connections and asked for collaboration. Through these random collaborations, we hoped to discover novel ways for collaboration and inclusive communication.

The project started with six north-south duets. We randomly created six pairs of artists—one from the North and one from the South to collaborate on their reply to Mrs Europe’s questions. The first three-week cycle resulted in six different art pieces. After that, the project got into its second three-week phase, where artists were randomly grouped in quartets, each made up of two duets. This second phase resulted in four original art pieces. The third and final phase of the Magnets project was a group collaboration

where after a period of three weeks, all 12 artists prepared *The One*, a unifying art piece. See Fig. 2 for a representation of MAGNETS participants and the creative process.

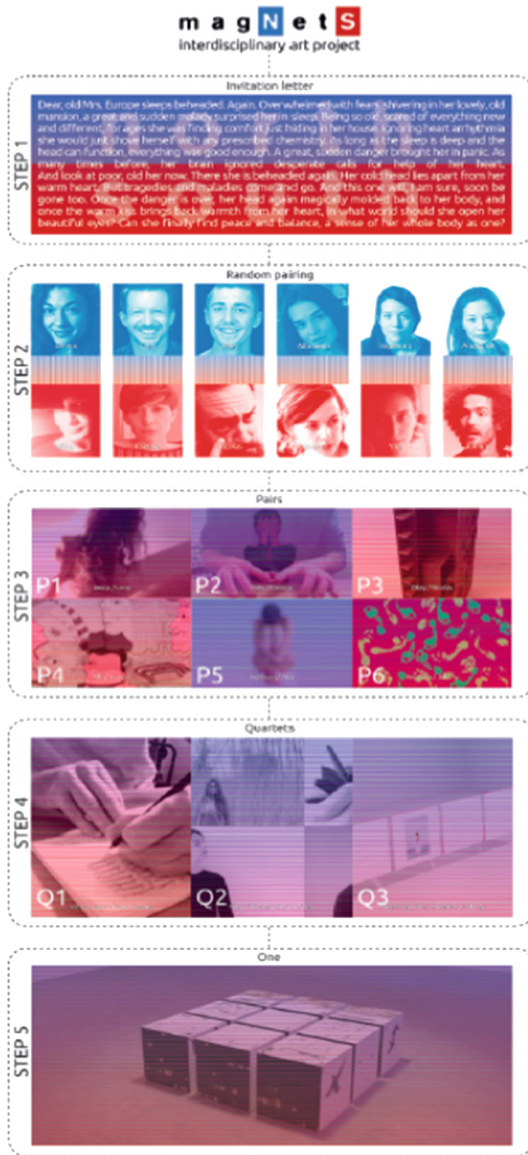


Fig. 2. MAGNETS project participants and creative process

MAGNETS project started in May 2020 and artists worked on their vision of post-covid society in three three-week phases. After *The One* was created we ran a series of interviews with all six pairs of artists. In the next section, we will provide an analysis of

the MAGNETS collaborative art project by looking at it from the perspective of artists who participated in the project.

3 Interviews with the Artists

MAGNETS collaborative art project was envisioned and run exclusively with one motivation, to give artists the opportunity to experience the process of creation in the situation of a complete standstill of public cultural life and express their feelings and views. We have reached for the digital realm as the only free and safe space for collaboration. Thinking that this space is traditionally acknowledged as a space that connects over time and space, we wanted to test its capacity to connect artists from different fields and those who even never met. Our idea was to test the capacity of the digital realm as a counter power of passive observation of art production collapse. Therefore, the testimonies we present and analyse here should be taken as accidental serendipity of this project.

Due to the lack of intention to run and look at the MAGNETS art project through the scientific lens, there was no particular structure in the interviews with the artists. The conversation with each pair, duets, was open-ended aiming only at recording their feelings about the project. However, the reason for performing the analysis of their testimonies lies in the fact that the content of all interviews converged on the following topics: communication, agency, meeting another person – feeling of friendship and love, feeling human, and the power of collaboration. Below we will briefly present each.

3.1 Communication

The literature acknowledged benefits of online interactions with online strangers [14–17]. Being an activity that comes as a by-product of depression [14] or activity of acquiring bridging social capital where weak ties are transformed into strong ties [15] it is well accepted that online collaboration can increase our feeling of well-being.

As mentioned earlier, the artists who participated in the MAGNETS project collaborated with people they have never met so misunderstandings were expected. Also, it is good to emphasize that the communication in formal group meetings was happening through streaming, or as one artist calls it “video format”. In their personal communication, in duets and quartets, the artists were free to choose any format of communication they like. Some of them used voice over the internet, some were writing to each other, etc. Here is how they describe their communication.

“I find this format very complicated and difficult with the video. So, communication by writing to each other felt quite natural and also the fact that very early on we decided that misunderstandings are ok and that somehow the way we communicate would be only focused on the collaboration, and that made it very focused and very specific. And it’s a kind of communication I never had with anyone before, so that is profound in a way”

It is very interesting to note that artists find this communication “profound”. The feeling of strong intensity was present from the early beginning of the project and took us by surprise, so we tried to get a deeper understanding of it. In the following, one artist speaks about it.

“Maybe even the fact that we do not know each other made it easier to open up, to say exactly what we want to say, what we felt.”

The artists that collaborated on the MAGNETS project were surprised by the ease of communication. One artist said:

“It was surprisingly easy. This special time in history inspired all of us to do something different and unusual. So, we joined our creative energies. We did not know our limits; we went for the flow and it went easier than we expected”

The strong feeling of intensity, followed by good and easy communication goes well with the idea of engaged ideation [9], where the success of a collaborative art project is highly dependent on community dialogue and bringing members together.

3.2 Agency

Participatory processes are often understood as practices that deal with power, agency, social cohesion and the need of being part of something bigger [18]. In this project too, when asked about the reasons to accept the invitation the artists talk about appreciating the opportunity to actively work on the situation, be creative and meet other people.

“The opportunity to be creative, the opportunity to meet other people. Especially now in this unique period of time. I felt there is a lot to explore”.

It was clear that a complete standstill of cultural life was difficult for artists since they were in unusually passive, bystander roles. Traditionally, artists are people who dare to publicly challenge mainstream norms, establishment, and power in general so this project was welcomed as a field for exploration of their agency in these unprecedented times.

“I think it is a very great project. Just to actively try and do something in a situation when you are told not to do anything is really brave and good. Also, it has been great to meet new people, making friends, and to have possibilities to collaborate internationally”.

These expressions of positive feelings about the participation in the MAGNETS project which they see as a brave activity is a clear example that tackles the need for power and agency [19] in these unusual times.

3.3 Meeting Another Person, Friendship, Love

Apart from the fact that artists joined this project to explore their agency during the Covid-19 outbreak as a sudden occurrence of the unfavourable event [20], they report experiences of closeness with the other person online and surprising, novel feelings. The role of emotional components in collaborative activities is described as the core of collaborations [21] while collaborative art is traditionally understood as another opportunity to meet and gain an appreciation for each other [22]. This is exactly what participation in the MAGNETS project introduced.

“We all live in different countries, and different mentalities, although we are in Corona now which is the same everywhere, but, we managed to get close to another person that we never knew and created something that touched both of us in a new way. And for me, even though I have never met her, we are very close. We are close”

As Escalas and Stern [23] argue, this project proves that creative collaboration can get us emotionally quite far into being absorbed into the feelings of another person.

Literature shows that expressing emotions through art improves relationships with others and enhances feelings of well-being [24]. Nevertheless, working with a complete stranger could sound intimidating but in the online realm, it actually opened new possibilities. Here is how one artist describes the challenges, opportunities and joy of working with the unknown.

“It has been such a joy to collaborate because we do not know each other. There are no hang-ups the way they can be when you collaborate with colleagues where you know this person doesn’t like this direction, there will be blocks to that. It was really nice fresh clean start that left room for all kinds of possibilities. It was not so clear how are we going to do this, we are from different disciplines, different backgrounds, so the fact that we were able to come to a mutual place incorporating both of our backgrounds was great.”

Online communication and collaboration bring substance on a personal and communal level, fostering inspiration, achievement and belonging, and bringing joy [9]. Newly acquired emotions create stronger connections between the members, as this testimony below reads.

“Regardless if this project gets funded or not, I am happy that I met these two people.”

In the following subsection, we will go deeper into the exploration of the soul of digital art collaboration.

3.4 Feeling Human

MAGNETS was envisioned as a purely online collaborative art project that connected complete strangers during Covid 19 outbreak. We did not have any expectations or ambitions to explore the borders or question our humanity. However, the project was imbued with strong feelings and activities that some artists describe as the core of our humanity. Below is one of the examples.

“The uniqueness lies in... to work together in duos was very intimate, and to do that without ever met someone is unusual. And I think if you have a lot of communication on zoom, video, as human beings we want to connect on another, human levels. You want to chit-chat, it means politeness, asking about some other things...In this way, we got to the core of something that is very human without talking about these other things you talk about in our daily lives.”

To be physically separated from our fellow human beings is an extraordinary experience. From the quote above one can see that the need for human contact is essential and through bonds that link us to others we feel human and experience human dignity [5]. We should be aware that during Covid 19 pandemic looking for another fellow being, a connection, must have been more epitomized in the digital realm where such connections are not only allowed but also safe. However much this might sound self-explanatory, we believe that it is substantial worth noting that MAGNETS participants felt a need to describe acquiring strong human connections through this project.

“I would definitely recommend people to do this, the pandemic has put a lot of it on our heads. A lot of us have been isolating ourselves more or less depending on where we are in the world, based on how much pressure there is from the government, but all these connections, meetings, travelling, all of that what we have been doing without thinking about it, all of that is gone. Now we have to focus on where are we going, what

we have to do, who we want to spend time with, who we want to work with.. it created this intense focus, it's a bit intimidating, it's quite interesting too. It's kind of crystalized something new from this crisis. Yeah, I hope I can meet all these people at some time from this project, but there is also something nice about connecting without meeting, and arriving at certain conclusions, sorry maybe not conclusions, questions that we have in common. And looking at all the Duos and Quartets there are so many meeting points without having discussed that in person. And I think that is a beautiful thing, its strong human connection through this project.

Isolation and daily focus on safety created feelings of intimidation and separation from others. In other words, something that was before the crisis taken for granted, a connection with others, all of a sudden was gone. Through the testimony above it is clear that the artist implicitly describes surprise for sharing the same values, so called "questions" with other artists. As if the personal isolation introduced doubt in our common, human values. The crisis "crystalized" the importance of human connections. Finally, participation in a digital collaborative art project, as Shapiro-Phim argues [4], offered the experience of creating together which resulted in building a strong connection with others, sharing the same values, and reaffirming the feeling of being human.

3.5 The Power of Collaboration

This unique way of collaboration brought up a lot of discussions between artists during our meetings, but also a lot of back-channelling. During collaborations, if we are to succeed, we have to find a highly functional way of communication and decision-making [9]. During this project, artists were left alone to find the best ways and work around all challenges.

"There is a certain, I do not know, there is a certain way of communicating when you are in a collaboration that is friendly and functional and respectful, you kind of learn that along the way. After few rounds around the block, you learn that collaboration is not about your own way, it is about finding a way to get with the other person."

It was clear that in order to arrive at the successful production of *The One*, a unifying art piece, 12 artists from different countries and different disciplines had to arrive at misunderstandings and problems. The question was what will happen when such a crisis happens and there is no top-down structure or institution to impose the solution. The following quote clearly describes thinking along that line.

"I was thinking a lot about compromises that are usually taken as a bad thing, in this project there is something to be found there. Like things that would never happen if you had full control, and control is in any way illusion. So, this is again a little bit of a symbol of stepping back from your ego, from your illusion of control and creating something new in the gap between you and someone you never met. "

As Bublitz and colleagues argue [9] the process of collaborative art is less focussed on artistry and more motivated to render solutions that fit all. Another artist argues that dropping ego for the sake of collaboration was a core value of the MAGNETS project.

"It is one of the bases of this project to drop off ego and collaborate".

Finally, collaborations, especially interdisciplinary and international [25] are quite hard. They are expensive and require a lot of resources, starting from establishing a

common language of collaboration to the need for a lot of time and motivation to bring such complexity to a successful end.

“It’s been a very interesting process. And it was very difficult to go from Quartets to a big group of 12 people. It brings up many questions, expressing yourself or not, anonymity or not in a group. Representation! And that is very interesting and difficult, and to go back to how much it was easy to communicate back then, in quartets! People were bringing ideas from Quartets and people were ready to accept ideas. I find this very interesting on a bigger scale, thinking about how the world works also. It was very interesting to observe myself and the others that struggle for communication.:

The process implemented in the MAGNETS project forged meaningful collaboration not only to create art but to offer transformative ideas [26] in this case for collaborating on a larger worldwide scale. Artistic collaborations are powerful engines that can help us explore and understand who we are and what we need and can have long-term consequences. They should be embraced as transformational social engineering plants for increasing well-being. Participants of the MAGNETS project clearly report feeling good about their experience.

“Meeting our ideas in creative space was great.”

Of course, not everything in this online collaboration was positive. We have noticed that transitions from duets to quartets, and from quartets to *The One* were quite stressful for the participants. During the transitions to a new collaborative group construction, the artist went through new circles of alignment with people they haven’t met, they had to negotiate their communicational and collaborative practices, and finally artistic and human values. As each of the transitions introduced new challenges we witnessed a lot of backchanneling, long periods of silence, and on some occasions strong expressions of a high level of stress. One of the artists even dropped out from the quartet formation due to differences in “artistic values and goals”.

4 The Resurrection of Art and the Promotion of Human Dignity

By experiencing isolation, fear, uncertainty and shutdown of art [1], during the Covid-19 outbreak we have experienced a certain level of dehumanization and humiliation (personal communication with artists, Magnets, 2020). On one side, the artistic production was completely shut down as a consequence of the ban on mass gatherings, while on the other side, we as the audience were left isolated, at home, without options to socialize, enjoy or participate in a face-to-face art collaboration with others. Left alone, isolated and without agency to change that position, introduced the feeling of dehumanization.

Through their testimonies discussed above, the participants of the MAGNETS collaborative art project in an implicit way talk about their feelings of isolation and invisibilization during Covid 19 crisis. Through participation in the MAGNETS art project artists regained agency and actively resurrected art. With active participation in creating art, they restored their feeling of human dignity, the fullness of human contact, closeness and friendship.

Human dignity is not easy to define or describe. As a fundamental value of the human being, human dignity is “the experience of its fullness in love, kinship and friendship” [3] opposite of humiliation and invisibilization [4]. In other words, human dignity is a

social dimension that is tightly connected with the ways we are treated and connected to others, and our agency in creating and changing these relationships. As Hicks [27] describes it, most of us have a clear gut feeling about what human dignity is, but just a few of us can express that through words. Dignity is the essence of our humanity and without it, we wither away.

The scientific literature clearly identifies a positive link between arts and human dignity, arguing that art plays an important part in the actualization of dignity [28]. In its analysis of the relationship between the arts and the affirmation of human dignity Shapiro-Phim [4] offers a substantial list of arts-based initiatives that successfully restore and affirm human dignity. We argue that the MAGNETS art project was one such example.

Even though we all have a need and the right to art [29] Covid 19 crisis was an unusual crisis that introduced a complete standstill in cultural life. The only free and safe space for connection, collaboration and communication was the digital realm. Therefore, it was not surprising that our society consciously opted for the “blue pill” [1] and fully embraced digital space not only to transfer daily activities but also to collaborate and express through creating art. So, something that was with us for some time treated as additional equipment and valuable commodity suddenly became our only channel for expression and collaboration. Without the digital realm, we would have been in complete darkness. The digital realm was and is a safe and ideal tool where socialisation flourishes in physical distance, over national borders and languages. With it, we have got a chance for active engagement both with art and current social barriers. Therefore, we should embrace both the digital realm and collaborative art as transformative power plants to push difficult social challenges.

In conclusion, we accept ideas presented by Bublitz and colleagues [9] and with this project we advocate another look at aesthetics – aesthetics as a quest for a functional solution to a social problem. Therefore, collaborative art practices should be seen and supported as laboratories for the analysis of social problems and the prototyping of effective solutions.

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