

ADAPTIVE PRACTICES

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Providence, Rhode Island, is an ethnically diverse, densely populated waterfront city of just under 180,000 people. Incorporated in 1832, it's home to eight institutions of higher learning, including an Ivy League university and an internationally heralded design school. It's also home to Providence Public Library (PPL), which, from its founding in 1875,

has been an important resource for the city's dynamic immigrant communities – offering books, periodicals, media, and a wide range of educational opportunities in a variety of languages – as well as for its thriving art and design community, regularly hosting artists and art students doing research and serving as the public repository for the archives of a growing number of community arts organizations.

For the library's themed Exhibition & Program Series presented each spring, a Creative Fellow is selected to spend nine months researching, creating, and then presenting an original project inspired by the year's theme and based on the artist's investigations in our Special Collections. Recent Creative Fellows have produced work inspired by items in our collections focused on sheet music, food, futurism, local ecology, and historical images of Black hair, among others.

On March 1, 2020, the library was in its final weeks of an 18-month major renovation, during which the public had had extremely limited or

no access to our building. Our season of grand reopening celebratory events was scheduled to begin April 1, starting with the inauguration of our entirely new 730-square-foot exhibitions gallery (shows had previously been installed in cases in one of our reading rooms), which would feature an exhibition on the history of how we get the news.

But by March 16, with a rapidly spreading global pandemic having arrived in the United States, and Rhode Island among the Northeastern states hit earliest and hardest, a series of city and state advisories had sent most nonessential workers (including our entire staff) home into lockdown, where we expected to stay for at least several months. With gathering forbidden, there would be no grand reopening events.

After a few dazed weeks, the library staff began to understand that while it was not the one we had planned for, this was a new beginning. And because it wasn't the one we had planned

for, we, like everyone the library served, were uncertain about what we could expect – not only in our building, but in any realm of our lives: health, safety, relationships, housing, finances, work, even recreation. From our homes, the two of us began to pay attention to how people were experiencing and expressing that uncertainty. We scoured social and traditional media, joined formal and informal online gatherings locally, nationally and even internationally, and tuned into opinions wherever we could find them, from online comment sections, to call-in radio shows, to elegantly crafted essayistic diary entries in literary journals. We then compared notes with each other daily on how immediate and extended family members, friends, colleagues, community members, and leaders were responding and reacting to the new realities and perimeters of our lives.

Finally, we developed a response that allowed us to address this particular anxiety by sharing resources we had at our disposal in a new way, without duplicating what was being offered elsewhere.

We noted a thread of mourning for all the things that people now could not do, from the personal to the professional, from the familial to the societal. We were inundated with daily reminders from governmental and public health institutions that we were living in a new reality: contact with others could be deadly, and we needed to rethink our routines and our very lives to avoid it as much as possible. This led to messages, articles, forums, and individual conversations about the fear of living in isolation: what would happen to us, alone?

As if to compensate for this simultaneous need to isolate and fear of isolation, there was an almost immediate outpouring of

messages from museums, libraries, community centers, media providers, and educational organizations, offering opportunities to connect virtually; for “cocktail hours,” lectures, “hang-outs,” and discussions about pandemic and non-pandemic-related topics.

To limit exposure to the coronavirus, leaders of all sorts advised the public to take stock of the inventories of food and supplies already at their disposal before leaving home for something new, and we were encouraged to think of ways to safely share our resources with those who might not have them. This included everything from “shopping” the pantry staples we had at home before risking a trip to the grocery store, to assessing any specialized skills we might have that we could offer to those who were most vulnerable or overwhelmed (like asking elderly neighbors if we could pick up groceries for them when we finally had to go out for our own), to helping a needy child with homework (virtually, of course) so that the parents could work or tend to younger children.

In combing through all these messages, conversations, and advisories, and considering them in relation to one another, we realized that many people – friends, family members, neighbors, people writing formally or commenting online – were expressing especially deep anxiety about living with a combination of relentless uncertainty, intermittent productivity, and great potential loss of creativity due to mandated isolation. In this article, we offer insights into our response to these expressions and fears. We assessed the resources and strengths we retained despite the restricted access to our building. We inventoried what was being offered by the cultural community to respond to the new realities of life in a pandemic. We immersed ourselves in the formal and informal testimonials of people in our community and farther afield to understand what needs people were expressing. Finally, we developed a response that allowed us to address this particular anxiety by sharing resources we had at our disposal in a new way, without duplicating what was being offered elsewhere.

Pre-pandemic, for our 2020 Exhibition & Program Series, we had planned an exhibition curated by our Head Curator of Collections, a sound installation by our Creative Fellow, and a public program series curated by the Programs & Exhibitions staff – which consisted of the two of us. We had no high-quality photographs of the exhibition items, and, due to quarantine restrictions, no access to them, so the exhibition could not be modified for digital presentation. The building was inaccessible, so our Creative Fellow’s installation could not go in. Our program series had been curated to work in dialogue with the exhibition, so even if we could present it virtually, it would be severely compromised. We made the decision to move everything to the fall, in hopes that the pandemic would be behind us by then.

That change in plan left us with an empty calendar in an altered cultural landscape, with most people in our community, including us, stuck at home, longing for contact, and trying to adjust to the enormous changes in our lives. Our first decision was to focus on what we could do, not what we couldn’t; to consider the resources we had, not those we lacked. Our second was to create a project that responded to this unexpected, uncertain, anxious moment directly – without distracting from it, pretending it wasn’t happening, waiting things out until everything went back to normal, or sending a message of mourning for our lost season of celebration. Our third was to create work defined by and for the physical and emotional realities of life during COVID-19. We would take inventory of our resources, see which fit the moment, figure out how to share them, share them with those who might need them, and be ready to change plans quickly, given the evolving public health crisis.

Among the resources we quickly identified was our cadre of Creative Fellows.¹ Over the course of the six years that we have featured an annual Exhibition & Program Series, we have had one Creative Fellow each year, each working on a nine-month original project within our Special Collections, generating new meanings for those collections and bringing them to new audiences. The fellows were poet

and visual artist Laura Brown-LaVoie; visual and performance artist Becci Davis; sound and visual artist Kelly Eriksen; visual and theater artist Kerri King; visual artist Walker Mettling; and deejay and scholar Micah Salkind.

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As we thought about them, we realized that as artists, their endeavors often encompassed venturing into the unknown, enduring “fallow” periods of reflection and synthesis in which no immediate “product” would result, and working in solitude when research or experimentation was necessary. Their work practices included adapting themselves to facing the unknown, having “nothing” to show for their work for extended periods of time, and depending on themselves for motivation and inspiration – all skills now demanded of pretty much everyone during the pandemic.

We decided to ask them to create works that focused on these adaptive practices, showing how uncertainty, solitude, reflection, and fluctuations of productivity functioned not as obstacles to – but rather as part of – their creative processes, and to share that work with the public in a way that would invite participation and give others the opportunity to experiment with these tools of their practice. “Adaptive Practices” is what we eventually named the project, a suggestion made by one artist, agreed to by all of them, and wholeheartedly endorsed by us.

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and program series – we now had to think of all these things in some kind of new hybrid form. Consistent with the artists’ skills that the project was meant to highlight, we did not give them parameters for how they would share and exhibit their work, but asked them to generate ideas, promising to assist them with technology, access to online platforms, and any fabrication expenses that might arise. Knowing that many of them had lost income when shows, commissions, fellowships, and teaching opportunities had dried up, we offered an honorarium of \$500 to each artist. We were thrilled when all of them responded to our invitation to plunge immediately into an uncertain process with an enthusiastic “Yes!”

Within a day or so of getting the Creative Fellows’ commitment, we sent each of them a very short survey designed to encourage them to consider their creative processes, and to give us a fast way to find the through-lines among them:

- 1) Trying not to think about this question from solely the pandemic perspective (although obviously this current experience is part of all the experiences that will factor into your response), please complete this sentence with one word, or as few words as possible – the idea is to get at your immediate, reactive feeling, not your subsequent process of action:

“When faced with uncertainty,
I feel _____.”

- 2) Please describe the components and/or steps of your creative process. How do they fit/work together?

- 3) Please complete the following phrases (with as many words/sentences as you’d like):

a) “When I am working on a project
and I get stuck,
I _____.”

b) “I know my work is going well
when _____.”

The variety of their methods of response (including questioning the questions, as well as their actual answers to the survey) showed us that our role was to function as generative facilitators rather than directors, to get out of their way as much as possible, and to follow their leads. No matter how comfortable they were in the world of uncertainty, in this case they had not chosen it; their lives and work, too, had been upended, and they were looking for a focal point to help them get their bearings. We could provide compensation, a timeline, a flexible structure, encouragement to dream, technical resources and expertise, scheduling, and marketing – that is, the sureties of an established institution in which they could safely explore. Our own lives were chaotic, but we projected calm and offered them a new way to see themselves, as well as encouragement to time the project according to their own capacities and comfort.

After reading their survey responses, we scheduled a Zoom-based brainstorming meeting with the whole crew of artists. We asked some open-ended questions based on their survey responses just to get the conversation started, but almost immediately we were hearing their ideas for the work they wanted to do. In the interest of time, and realizing that our honorarium was modest, we had pitched the project from the beginning as less about coming up with something new and more about turning an almost anthropological eye upon themselves, making a study not so much of what they did, but of *how*, as artists, they managed those inevitable periods of uncertainty, isolation, and indiscernible productivity. We asked them to become conscious of what they were already doing, and, while doing it, make the process of navigating and negotiating their way through those crises of confidence visible and accessible to others, so that those others might find a way to adapt those processes to the uncertainties and anxieties of their own now upended lives.

Following the initial group conversation, we had a series of individual conversations with each artist to help them to more

clearly define what they wanted to do and how they wanted to do it. We then set about figuring out how to best bring each work to the public via virtual exhibition and/or performance. Invited to model their processes of utilizing uncertainty, constraint, and isolation in their work, the artists' inventive responses included invitational dance, sonic explorations, sleep realignment meditations, workshops on "home," and a 24-hour drawing marathon. Many of them chose durational ways of creating, exhibiting, and experiencing work, and in a time of great chronological upheaval, that dynamic of following a sequence was inviting and powerful.

Just as we had searched our "pantry" for human resources, we now made an inventory of the library's technological toolbox. While we had acquired and used most of our tools for marketing rather than accessibility and exhibition purposes, we now looked at all of them with a new eye: LibCal, our scheduling registration, and event-related emailing platform; our YouTube Channel; and the newest addition, Zoom. The artists also brought their own virtual mediums, including InShot, a photograph slideshow; Twitch, a gaming network; SoundCloud, an open platform for audio sharing; and the Linguistic Atlas Project, a database digitized in the late 20th century containing sounds dating back to the 1930s. Finally, we added to this the library's resources of laptops, digital space, and our expertise.

Whether generated by digital prompts or suggestions given in an online presentation, engagement offline was key to several projects, and it was up to participants whether they chose to join the optional gatherings for sharing their experiences or not. Participants had a lot of choices, and the format of every artist's work had some "give" in it, so that during a time when commitment to almost anything felt fraught and burdensome, it was easy for participants to adjust their level and scheduling of engagement based on how they felt from day to day.

In several projects, members of the public were invited to subscribe to a series of emails containing digital prompts, which could be opened and followed at the participant's convenience. Laura Brown LaVoie sent out a nightly email for a week, laying out a timeline and set of activities designed to enhance participants' experience of rest, sleep, regeneration, and waking; as a finale, she invited participants to an optional Zoom-based gathering to share their experiences of the week. Micah Salkind sent out a daily email prompt that linked to a sound mix on the music sharing site SoundCloud; each day's mix came with a theme and some questions to consider while listening, often related to the challenges presented by some aspect of daily life during the pandemic. While the mix was created to be listened to on a walk, many people listened while cooking dinner or getting ready for bed, adapting it to their needs and schedules. At the end of the week, Micah hosted an optional online gathering for those who wished to compare reactions, hear more about his musical choices, and discuss the challenges he was addressing.

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Walker Mettling hosted a 24-hour 40th-birthday drawing marathon on Twitch, inviting people to "stop in" at any time on the platform to watch, comment, and converse; he also kept the door to his house open all day so that people could stop by his "in-real-life" yard, see what he was drawing, and engage in a dialogue with him as well as the people on Twitch at that moment.

The following week he hosted an optional Zoom showing of the work he had created throughout the marathon and since, and talked about the process of working through the long hours.

Becci Davis hosted a Zoom gathering to show work on the idea of “home,” and talked about her process of examining and organizing images of her family’s hometown in the South, as reflected in photographs she has gathered and taken over the past few decades, a process which ineluctably tells our national story of racial violence. Participants, now locked down at “home,” were encouraged to create their own story about home, defined by their own photographs; she presented a variety of ways to create and share these “exhibitions,” from apps created for such work to simple photography of photography. Her second event, a week later, gave participants the opportunity to exhibit their own works via the Zoom screen. They also shared their reflections on adapting her practice to examine their own stories, and what it felt like to define a notion of “home” at such an unsettled, insecure time.

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Artist Kerri King released a series of emails to subscribers, each including introductory text and links to sets of videos with and without voiceover, documenting her evolving thoughts and experiments with public dancing as she endeavored to keep up her tap dance practice despite her teacher’s studio closing, her desire to not disturb her neighbors, and the

restrictions on use of public spaces due to the pandemic. She chose not to host a post-series gathering on Zoom, which added a level of interior contemplation and quiet mystery to the experience of watching her works.

In her first session, sound artist Kelly Eriksen gave a talk on the history of an influential linguistic study carried out for many decades of the 20th century, and described her work, including visualizations based on the study and its eccentric inconsistencies. She then invited attendees to undertake a week of close-attention activities based on her findings; at her second session, participants shared their experiences and responses to paying a kind of attention that they had not considered before.

Overall, flexibility, a general willingness to train in the bare minimum of new media, and time were key. Adaptability in this technical context meant understanding constraints of time and skill. For the artists and for us, a rooting into strengths became the basis for exploration in, and of, uncertain times. In all cases, the content dictated the medium, and we found that we now had an agile, generative program model developed in its very planning: a born-digital, born-COVID, flexible vessel adaptable to the artists’ and our evolving needs, resources, capabilities, and questions.

We had first approached the artists on April 1 (which, meaningfully, had been the original date of our gallery grand opening). On April 16, the first artist presented her work; the final artist presented hers on May 8. During the intense three-week period in-between, we presented works by the six artists across days and nights via a variety of platforms and protocols. While they had each developed their work individually, the resonances and interplays that emerged across their presentations added to the power of the experience for anyone who chose to follow more than one artist’s work – and, according to the artists, added to the depth of their experiences as well.

Because all of the works were flexible enough in design that the public could, at least to some

degree, take part at their own convenience and on their own schedule, there was a communal sense throughout the city of many people sharing an experience, even if not at exactly the same time. At a moment when all structure and predictability had collapsed and nothing new had yet taken their place, and at a time when gathering – the comfort of company – was forbidden, the sense of shared engagement in time and geographical space, even if not physically together, lent a sense of delight, wonder, and reassurance to our lives that felt necessary and miraculous. While we did not have an exhibition in our gallery, these works were exhibited and extended themselves throughout the city via various media and in real life, overlapping in time and response as word of the various projects spread. As they found resonance with one another, they became part of multiple conversations and imbued our city, a gallery at large, with all the excitement, curiosity, and innovation that a vital physical exhibition can create.

In the weeks and months that have followed, much has changed. While we understand the pandemic better, we no longer believe that it will be short-lived. While it was initially described as a universal leveler, we now understand that it has hit hard across our nation’s familiar fault lines of race and class, stressing them even more precariously.

In fall 2020, we were among several Providence cultural organizations awarded funding from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities for a project aiming to strengthen the relationship between journalism and civic engagement. In bringing on three independent media producers/activists as our collaborative team, we have adapted the model we developed in creating Adaptive Practices. We invited our journalist/activists to reflect upon their own practices of documentation and community organizing, and then create a project that 1) highlights those practices; 2) gives the audience a way to experience the team putting them to use; and 3) encourages audience members to reflect on how they might adapt those practices to their own uses. While our fall 2020 exhibition – curated from

our own Special Collections along with loans from other historical institutions – could not open to the public due to the pandemic, these activists and journalists could view the artifacts and works on exhibit; they have become the interrogators, interpreters, guides, and mentors for the public in digital, virtual, and off-line experiences around our exhibition, collections, and curatorial practices.

Still working from home as the one-year anniversary of the pandemic approaches, as “adaptive practitioners” ourselves, we are focused on being generative facilitators: inviting community members to enliven and expand access to our collections despite reduced physical accessibility, and learning to redefine limitations as invitations to re-view and re-think. ■

¹ For more on the Providence Public Library’s Creative Fellowship, see “Creative Fellowship,” PPL, <https://www.provlib.org/research-collections/artists-at-ppl/creative-fellowship/>.