

Art-mediated intergenerational solidarity during a coronavirus pandemic

Milada Sommerova

Annotation:

The paper discusses the phenomenon of intergenerational solidarity in the art of the past years and also intensively right now, in the art that arises during a pandemic. It points to possible aspects of visual creation related to intergenerational issues, and the issue of social isolation, loneliness and fear. The paper is also a polemic about the possible digitization of art teaching, which has been implemented (mainly through social networks) within the course Art and Creation.

Keywords: solidarity, art, visual, intergenerational, social, initiative, pandemic, family

Introduction

In the Czech Republic, the first signs of coronavirus were confirmed at the beginning of March 2020, but the pandemic has been spreading worldwide since the end of 2019. We find ourselves in a time of uncertainty, fear, social isolation. However, this challenging period has brought several positive changes to our everyday life, we have realized the undeniable benefits of mutual assistance, it can be said that the crisis situation has brought us together. The initiative to help the people most affected by the pandemic came from, among other associations, Czech universities. In mid-September, *the MUNI Volunteer Centre* had already fulfilled more than 2500 requests for assistance in a difficult situation. You can also follow the *Volunteer Center* activity on Facebook in the "Muni pomáhá Dobrovolníci" group, which was created directly for the purpose of the current need. So we have seen a huge wave of solidarity that is still going on- both from individuals and from whole organised groups. Several volunteer centres were also established, to offer delivery of purchases, to pick up drugs, etc. Many organizations have pointed out that many seniors may feel lonely in this difficult time and they can even die in solitude. Old people also face a lack of technical and mental support in addition to the lack of material equipment to fight the pandemic. Doctors Without Borders highlights *the need to be aware of the complexity and exceptionality of the situation, they highlight the vulnerability of residents of homes for the elderly, who are already at an advanced age, and they are often fragile and need assistance even with daily activities* (Lekari-bez-hranic.cz, 2020). Seniors in retirement homes and anywhere in the world have something in common. They all had their past, their homes in which they grew up, and which they often remember very well to a later age. This idea was applied in the past by students of *Special Art Education*, when in 2013 they went to a home for the elderly in Brno and let

local grandmothers and grandfathers remember their homes within the project “Rooms from childhood or as far as my memory goes” (Stadlerová a co., 2013) and portray them on canvas in ink. It is these memories that can be something absolutely crucial that can help old people deal with feelings of insecurity or fear during uncertain times.

1 Intergenerational relations in the digital era

In a short time, mostly for fear of the possible consequences of illness, old people had to separate from their loved ones, especially their grandchildren, with whom they were often used to spend a lot of time and also care of them. “Moreover, the opportunity to care for grandchildren is becoming an important source of life satisfaction for many seniors. In recently realized research¹, more than half of the grandparents surveyed identified this role as the most important or second most important in their lives” (Hasmanová Marhánková, Štípková, 2018, p. 10). Because of the widely discussed indispensability of intergenerational attachment at the time of the pandemic I decided to teach *art and creation* as a reflection on intergenerational solidarity. Although we are used to operate mostly online, it may not be a matter of course for the generation of our grandparents to handle new technologies, perhaps because they have not received the necessary technical assistance, equipment, or they have not already been able to fully include digital media in their lives at their age. In particular, we are talking about video calls as a means of dealing with social isolation, which, moreover, can be a valuable intergenerational link. Some of the seniors, however, are still reliant on the “ordinary phone”. But the phone also plays a very important role in times of involuntary isolation. In addition to the regular dialogue, the phone can also be a tool for creative action, eg. initiated, prepared dialogue, which was recorded by a student of the subject *Art and Creation* as a part of a creative project with his grandmother. This dialogue is spoken in the adult voice of his “children's self” and although it may be slightly pathetic at first listening, it consists of the student's core memories of time spent with grandmother in his childhood and this dialogue thus becomes an important record of intergenerational interaction. The student recorded this conversation with his grandmother and shared it in a Facebook group created especially for the subject. The contribution received a lot of feedback, and above all initiated a discussion about intergenerational solidarity, grandparenting, and the care of the souls of grandmothers and grandfathers at the time of the pandemic. It is clear that nowadays the focus is mainly on individualization and there is often talk of the nuclear family as the elementary one², moreover “people cease to invest in family bonds, and the nuclear family itself is freed from all other

¹ research published in 2018

² the need and the possibility of involving grandparents in the education and care of a child (especially in large cities) is generally reduced

relatives and gradually decreasing itself” (Popenoe, 1993 in : Hasmanová Marhánková, Štípková, 2018, p. 19) .

2 Online platform for teaching art through social networks

Setting up a group on Facebook proved to be a central way of distance practicing art lessons at the time of the pandemic. Of course, there are many advantages, but also many pitfalls. For example, there are students who do not have an account on this or any other social network and do not wish to have it, so this fact must also be reckoned with. However, we found ourselves in a state of emergency essentially day to day, with no possibility of previous preparations for distance learning, and this solution seemed the easiest at the moment. The Facebook group was therefore created as an alternative, electronic platform of the subject *Art and Creation*, that is mainly based on practical creative activity (which, however, could not be implemented as expected at the time of the pandemic). Students could at least be proactive in a normal and natural way thanks to this option, because most of them are active on social networks after all. In addition to videos, interviews, podcasts and articles that students shared with each other, they were also able to publish the homework they were continuously creating. Already from the beginning, students were motivated by the common theme “Solidarity, as an important social aspect of art”. The topic and the associated discourse will be mentioned below, now let's focus on the distance way of art teaching. The teaching of practical disciplines is normally dependent on some tangible act, experience. Especially in art and artistic creation, it is very important to be able to try the technique, and experience it with all the senses. It is whole experience that plays the significant role. However, in distance form, the closest thing to this is streaming online lessons, via video call, where students can be provided with real “live” contact with the teacher. The students would be given the opportunity to ask questions directly in real time, so that teaching could be individualized to some extent and adapted to the needs of students. Nevertheless, it is not certain that students will be able to practically use such remotely and theoretically obtained information.

3 Solidarity

The word solidarity is often mentioned in sociology, psychological sciences (mainly in social psychology), theology, philosophy, and other theoretical-empirical contexts, not least in social work. In the past, solidarity has been associated with names such as Durkheim, Comte, Homans, Jensen, Bengtson, etc. “Solidarity could be defined as a certain readiness to help other people (...) unlike other human activities, solidarity is an act that presupposes a prudent decision of the individual on whether and how he can support another person” (Levická, Levická, Truhlářová, 2015, p. 8). It is important to mention that solidarity makes a huge contribution not only to the person receiving the assistance but

also to the person who provides it himself. Solidarity should be selfless and is often built on the common values or ideas of its actors. When we talk about intergenerational solidarity, it is worth remembering that it can be implemented in two ways, in *micro-level - within the family, macro-level - between generations in society* (Levická, Levická, Truhlářová, 2015, p. 43).

4 Social themes in contemporary art

If we focus more deeply on solidarity in art, we will probably recall the projects of Kateřina Šedá, a prominent Czech artist who is known (not only) for reflecting various social topics through art, such as a project she carried out with her grandmother Jana (1930-2007), about which she herself wrote:

"Despite her lifelong activity, she decided to retire all her activities. But the household she ran with grandfather did not fully allow her to do so. When he died, of course, it hit her, but at the same time, it was an impulse to begin complete doing nothing. Indeed, she has made her plan with incredible care. The only time she gets out of bed is for lunch that my mom brings her; she doesn't want to change or wash, and she has no relation to water, as she often reminds us. She doesn't eat because she doesn't like it from herself; she doesn't clean because she says she doesn't see a mess. She can't even go for a walk because she just doesn't want to" (Šedá, 2005).

This grandmother was then encouraged by Kateřina Šedá to draw the goods from household supplies store in which the grandmother spent most of her active being. The reference to the activities of Kateřina Šedá should have encouraged students to think about old age in the context of voluntary or involuntary isolation, the renouncement of their "normal" past life, or in relation to the tools that artistic activity can offer old people. Between the generation of grandmothers and grandfathers and the generation of their grandchildren, the memories of grandparents are an important milestone, which can become a valuable source of inspiration for the artistic storytelling of their stories. Even with her second grandmother Milada (*1935), Kateřina Šedá carried out her project. This time, the publication of a book of grandmother's memories called "Normal Life". Šedá attached the individual sheets from the book to the wall of the House of Art in České Budějovice (Šedá, 2014), one by one, so that the visitor became part of her grandmother's memories and stories connected with the communist Czechoslovakia era, era of the revolution, while browsing the exhibition space. The realization of these two projects by Kateřina Šedá and her grandmothers certainly had a great overlap. For example, accompanying programs in the gallery often involved children who, as part of a gallery animation, portrayed their homes, the homes of their grandparents, their grandmothers and grandfathers. And so they unwittingly co-created another intergenerational bond.

In fact, Kateřina Šedá commented on the topic of social isolation long before the pandemic, when she noticed the depersonalization that is becoming typical of large housing estates, where people no

longer greet and behave much more anonymously. As she explains: “while the village rules still work in the original part of Líšeň (we know each other, we have a ethnography ensemble, we celebrate feasts, etc.), Nová Líšeň bears all the signs of the term “stop” – most residents “stop here” just for the night and spend the rest of the day in the city of Brno” (Šedá, Peško, 2008, p. 40). The inhabitants of Brno often have it connected with this project from 2007 entitled “For every dog a different master” (Šedá, 2007). The project was based on the fact that the previously unsailed grey prefabs were given a new facade – a colourful one. However, each house was completely different, so the housing estate “lit up like an engrossing attraction” (Šedá, 2007). Kateřina Šedá, who grew up in Líšeň, reflects that much has changed. In the original part of Líšeň, the same rules as in the village still worked, but not in the new one. Šedá points out that many architects collaborated on the revitalization of the settlement, but none of them took into account the whole, and therefore the settlement looks somewhat asynchronous, glowing with gaudy colors, each house different, yet unites its inhabitants.

Šedá points out that what the inhabitants of the housing estate have in common is that they are all from else. Inspired by this idea, Šedá tried to find a majority pattern in the colour and character of the resident and unite all the inhabitants underneath. This pattern, which she actually obtained from the architects of the individual houses, was printed by Šedá on the canvas and thus reproduced. And under a very witty and subtle idea, she introduced it to the inhabitants of the settlement: “I wanted to regenerate not only this place but also the relationships in it. At the beginning of my reflection was the following finding: the common cause will become visible when we share it with each other. A few days later, she copied the names from the bells and made a list of about 1,000 families, selected the pair so that the families could not know each other, and sent a package with a shirt with a housing estate imprint to all the paired families, lists the opposite family as the sender. Then she paused for a month, and the families had no idea that Kateřina Šedá was behind the project until exactly a month later they received an invitation to the gallery, where it was not about what was on display in the gallery, but how many families would meet in it. On this project of Kateřina Šedá, the idea is fundamental, to connect people with what is moving them away. The anonymity of the settlement thus turned into intense interpersonal contact, interaction, sharing feelings of relish and resentment, curiosity and togetherness. It turns out that art can be a valuable tool of interpersonal interaction as well as a means of materialization of deep social themes.

5 Art helps

The willingness and desire to help the others also came from artists and art students whose activities were suspended as a result of the pandemic. They teamed up under the tag *#arthelps* and set about sewing masks and arranging food for homeless people who had lost their usual ways of obtaining food such as leftover portions from restaurants because of the pandemic. “For example, a Czech offshoot

of an international collective professing veganism and anti-militarism called *Food Not Bombs* has vehemently participated in the volunteer marathon. One of the activists who subscribe to this movement is a cartoonist and performer known under the stage name *Toybox*" (Gálová, 2020). Toybox is sometimes called the first lady of Czech street art, and although she is a graduate of the Literary and Performing Arts Academy, she initially devoted herself to journalism, until later she began secretly sticking her drawings on the wall. In bookstores, you will come across her *Comic-book textbook*, on the streets then art interventions from her illustrations. We mention Toybox here specifically since she is an author whose work is defined by important social topics and which she does not overlook but points out, such as climate, racism, homelessness, etc. Large-format paintings of people from the fringes of society were exhibited in Český Krumlov some time ago. She prepares and carries food to the homeless people who modeled for her.

Conclusion

Aristotle has already spoken of solidarity, and in all times in the history of society, it has always been something that unites us as humans. Solidarity is based on mutual respect and understanding, but it can only happen if we remain open and mindful of what is happening around us. If we are too far-sighted and we are not indifferent to the constantly forward-looking individualization of contemporary society, which gradually translates into interpersonal and intergenerational relationships (both micro- and macro-oriented), we can remain vigilant and, through the acts of solidarity, get closer to each other. At a time of pandemics, which have often brought with them the questioning of the traditional family setting, the value of intergenerational care and intergenerational solidarity is indisputable. It turns out that art can be a valuable tool for reflecting on a variety of social themes, as well as a sublimating element in times of social isolation. Distance-learning based teaching of practical art subjects can be carried out using online tools, however, this form has its specifics and in many ways does not meet the current form and requirements of full-time teaching. The actual benefit or harm of distance education in the art will probably be able to be objectively assessed with hindsight.

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Author

Mgr. Milada Sommer

Department of Fine Arts, Masaryk University Brno

misommerova@gmail.com

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