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Home, Health and Power: Exploring Experiences of and Responses to the Pandemic through the Global @covid19quilt Project

Abstract

This article explores the @Covid19Quilt, a global digital participatory art project started by Australian artists Kate Just and Tal Fitzpatrick, designed to gather and share people’s experience of the COVID-19 pandemic via craft. Starting with an overview of this continuing project, this article applies an interdisciplinary lens to consider the significance of making and sharing during a pandemic. Drawing on a preliminary thematic analysis of the quilt, we discuss three broad motifs that have characterised the project thus far: home, health, and power. In exploring these three themes, the paper highlights the ways in which the @Covid19Quilt project is an important cultural artefact that draws together ‘threads of collective meaning and understanding’ (Ferrell, Hayward, Young 2015, 3) and opens up possibilities for transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary dialogue.

Keywords

COVID-19, Pandemic Art, Participatory Art, Digital Quilt, Interdisciplinary

Introduction

In late December 2019 and early January 2020, reports began to emerge of a cluster of pneumonia cases in the city of Wuhan, China, without a known cause. Subsequently identified by the World Health Organisation as a novel coronavirus and named COVID-19, by the 11th March 2020, this fast-spreading virus was officially declared a global pandemic (World Health

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Organization 2020a). The rapid spread of COVID-19 obliged countries around the globe to respond, some taking action to minimise the threat more swiftly and effectively than others. Quite quickly, people found themselves subject to various government mandated control measures, including travel restrictions, the closing of borders, regional and national lockdowns, the introduction of mandatory mask wearing, and the quarantining of those afflicted with the virus.

As the world went into lockdown, people sought out activities to help them cope with the personal, social and economic challenges that coronavirus restrictions introduced or exacerbated. These activities were not only a way to fill the additional time some people suddenly had on their hands as entire industries shut down and communities were subject to various degrees of lockdown, but they also helped people deal with their anxieties and concerns around the pandemic itself (Inocencio Smith 2020). Notably, many people (re)turned to craft activities such as knitting, weaving, quilting, and embroidery, with “hashtags such as #quarantinecrafts #covidcrafting #coronaviruscraftproject #coronaviruscraftchallenge... trend[ing] across social media platforms” early on in the pandemic (Fairley 2020).

As individuals (re)engaged with craft practices, a number of participatory quilt-inspired projects emerged as a way to encourage people to connect, virtually, whilst maintaining their physical distance. In this paper we discuss one such project, the global @Covid19Quilt project, in order to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of the function these projects have played during this pandemic along with their significance as cultural artefacts that open up a space for contributors to creatively engage with issues that are important and meaningful to them during this significant point in history (O’Neill 2017).

We begin by providing an overview of the project, before moving on to explore the important role artists have played as facilitators, creators and curators of culture during this global pandemic specifically, and in moment-

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tous points in history more generally. Following this, we focus on three motifs identified in a thematic analysis of the @Covid19Quilt: home, health and power. In discussing these key themes, we juxtapose the personal and socio-political concerns evident in the quilt with the emergent interdisciplinary academic research around the pandemic and, building on the work of criminologists O’Neill and Seal (2012, 155-159), demonstrate three key points: one, the @Covid19Quilt provides individuals with a space “for dialogue and for listening and communicating experience across linguistic and cultural divides” (O’Neill and Seal 2012, 158); two, the @Covid19Quilt is a site where complex social issues are being explored in ways that not only complement academic discourse and knowledge, but in a forum that is more visible and accessible to the public; and three, the @Covid19Quilt, as a cultural artefact, exemplifies the possibilities of interdisciplinary, creative, and critical research that is “committed to exploring how culture is materialised in different contexts” (Woodward 2020, 17; O’Neill and Seal 2012, 159).

The @Covid19Quilt Project

Designed to enable contributors from around the world “[...] to gather, narrate and share their experiences of Covid-19 via craft” (Just 2020), the @Covid19Quilt project was started and is led by Melbourne-based artists Kate Just (@katejustknits) and Tal Fitzpatrick (@talfitzpatrick). The project began on the 5th of April 2020, one week after Australia’s first nationwide lockdown and, at the time of writing, continues to accept submissions, with Just and Fitzpatrick committed to growing the project for as long as COVID-19 is considered a global pandemic. Part digital quilt, part time capsule, this project facilitates the integration of people’s craft practices, their use of social media, their interior emotional lives, and their responses to current events as they unfold.

Contributions to this project are collected via the @Covid19Quilt Instagram feed, which as of May 2021 has over 3.9k followers, and is itself the digital ‘quilt’ at the centre of this project. To take part in the @Covid19Quilt project makers are invited to submit a square image of a textile-based work they created during the pandemic, along with a short statement detailing how the piece relates to their experiences of COVID-19, via direct message to the project’s Instagram page. Just and Fitzpatrick then post the image and accompanying text on the main feed of the @Covid19Quilt Instagram page, along with the maker’s name and/or Instagram handle and their location. As of April 28, 2021, they have received over 522 submissions from 28 coun-
tries around the globe including: Australia, United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales), United States, New Zealand, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Ecuador, Estonia, Spain, Greece, Austria, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Japan, China, Croatia, Romania, France, Georgia, Netherlands, Malaysia, Denmark, Switzerland, Vietnam, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates. Participants include professional artists, skilled amateurs and first-time crafters of all ages, working across a range of techniques from embroidery and hand sewing to cross-stitch and knitting.

While the primary site for engaging with this artwork is Instagram, the @Covid19Quilt project has been recognised outside this digital space, reaching a broader audience through its inclusion in online and physical exhibitions and publications, including the 2020 Incinerator Gallery Art Award for Activist Art, where the @Covid19Quilt project was awarded the People’s Choice Award (Incinerator Gallery 2020), and The National 2021: Contemporary Australian Art exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, which includes an installation of Kate Just’s recent work. To date, the @Covid19Quilt has also been featured on the Australian TV show The Mix (ABC TV, 2020) as well as in multiple online publications including Art Guide Australia (Downes 2020), Crafts Council UK (Crafts Magazine 2020), and Frankie (The Frankie Team 2020).

Making and Sharing in a Pandemic

As facilitators, creators and curators of this project, Just and Fitzpatrick state that they started the @Covid19Quilt Instagram page as “a way of responding to the distress, illness and loss arising globally due to the pandemic” (Just 2020). Sensing that in this moment of crisis, many of the artists and makers who constitute the online communities they are a part of would turn to their creative practices as a way to process what was happening, Just and Fitzpatrick chose to create a communal space where groups of predominantly women could use digital technologies to come together to narrate their histories through craft (Robson 2021).

In this way, the @Covid19Quilt project builds on a long legacy of participatory and collaborative textile art projects that use craft as a way to centre women and other marginalised communities and to document significant historical events, including other pandemics, as they unfold. Other notable examples include: the US-based NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (National AIDS Memorial no date), which aimed to memorialise the lives of those lost to AIDS at a time when key political and medical figures were si-
lent on the crisis; the Gee’s Bend Quiltmakers (Arnett, Herman 2006; Collins 2015), who since the early twentieth century have been creating quilts that “rank with the finest abstract art of any tradition” (Livingstone quoted in Wallach 2016), while also contributing to the Civil Rights movement and supporting their own community by establishing a foundation that fosters economic empowerment, racial and social justice, and educational advancement (Souls Grown Deep 2019); the Monument Quilt (FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture no date), which featured the personal stories, in the form of “written, drawn or stitched” quilt blocks, of survivors of sexual violence; and, the global Universal Declaration of Human Rights Quilt Project (2017), which constituted a series of quilts created to celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on its 70 year anniversary, as well as document the current state of human rights (Museum of Australian Democracy 2018). Each of these participatory art/craft endeavours demonstrate the role that creativity can play in not only “capturing human experiences” and chronicling events (Hunter 2019, 10), but also drawing attention to and calling for action on a range of social concerns (McGovern 2019).

The @Covid19Quilt project is also informed by the practice of ‘craftivism’ (Greer 2007), which brings together craft and activism and is defined by Fitzpatrick in her self-published book Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology (2018, 3), as:

[...] both a strategy for non-violent activism and a mode of DIY citizenship that looks to influence positive social and political change. This uniquely 21st Century practice involve[s] the combination of craft techniques with elements of social and/or digital engagement as part of a proactive effort to bring attention to, or pragmatically address, issues of social, political and environmental justice.

As this definition highlights, contemporary forms of ‘craftivism’ often rely on 21st century technologies, such as home computers with access to the internet, digital cameras and smartphones, as well as blogs and social media platforms that allow the rapid sharing of user-created content and the coalescing of online communities of interest.

These technologies, as craft critics Robertson and Vinebaum (2016, 6) explain, “[...] played a central role in moving textiles from the private to the public sphere” and have become essential for facilitating and encouraging interventionist collaborative practices at a global scale. Indeed, as social theorists argue, digital technologies have “have transformed how people engage with one another” (Stratton et al. 2017, 24, emphasis in original). Through its integration of social media into its design, this project functions
as a digital space where makers come together to express their views on broader social, political, and environmental concerns with public audiences. As the following analysis of the @Covid19Quilt highlights, the project serves as a dynamic record that traces “the wider socio-political impact of COVID-19 as participants reflect on broader issues and systematic inequalities highlighted, intersected and/or exasperated by the pandemic, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, domestic violence, wealth distribution and healthcare access” (Robson 2021).

@Covid19Quilt—Themes of the Pandemic

A preliminary thematic analysis\(^2\) (Braun, Clarke 2006) of the contributions made to the @Covid19Quilt Instagram page has highlighted a number of broad themes evident across the contributions submitted thus far. These themes not only demonstrate the key reflections of contributors during the pandemic, but also indicate how these reflections have evolved and shifted over the period of the pandemic, from a focus on the personal to the community to the political, mirroring the socio-political climate that contributors were no doubt experiencing while creating their pieces, or what photographer and artist Nick Jaffe (2014, 3) refers to as a “shared subjective experience.”

For the purposes of this paper, we discuss three key themes that feature repeatedly in the @Covid19Quilt: home, health and power. We explore these three themes in turn by using a range of submissions from the @covid19 Quilt\(^3\) to highlight the way that these works intersect with interdisciplinary concerns and scholarship, as discussed above, before engaging in a discussion about the ways in which this global project has made effective use of digital and social media to foster the sharing of stories and recognise how “[...] creative expression can provide individuals with an important avenue for empowerment and emancipation” (Fitzpatrick 2020).

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\(^2\) According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 79), “[t]hematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.”

\(^3\) Just and Fitzpatrick requested permission to share these images and accompanying statements from all the participants of this project and have only shared those where express permission was granted for their work to be included in publications.
**Home**

In the early days of the pandemic, home became a very familiar place to people, as governments across the globe requested—or mandated—that their citizens stay at home to stop the spread of the virus. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, ‘home’ has been a prominent theme in @Covid19Quilt contributions, initially as a call to action—‘Stay Home!’ (Fig. 1)—then as a critique of who is affected by such mandates and in what ways.

As people found themselves confined to the home for extended periods, the home suddenly took on a very different meaning and role than it had pre-pandemic. This contribution from @jayneraven from London, England (Fig. 2), for example, reflects on how stay at home orders have impacted those without a home, raising questions about the governmental failures to provide support for vulnerable populations such as the homeless. As public policy and administration scholars Benavides and Nukpezah (2020) note in their examination of local government responses to the homeless during the pandemic, there are serious moral, ethical and human rights considerations that need to be addressed when managing the needs of these populations at this time. Such concerns have similarly been front of mind for a number of contributors to the @Covid19Quilt project.

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**Fig. 1. Stay Home Orders**
*Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram*
The situation for homeless populations sits in stark contrast to those who do have a home, as evident in the quilt. Contributors to the @Covid19Quilt spoke of the safety and sanctuary that their homes provided them during the pandemic. For example, for @dougwebb91 in Melbourne, Australia, being confined to the home initially gave them the opportunity to engage in activities that aligned with their values and enabled them to care for and nurture others (Fig. 3).
With many unable to continue working in their usual setting, the home space also suddenly became a workplace, with bedrooms, kitchens, living spaces, and dining tables serving dual functions as workspaces. Navigating the blurring of home/office boundaries was particularly challenging for those who were also taking on carer and/or childcare duties, particularly women. As sociologists Collins et al. (2020, 1, 5-8) found in the US context, “[s]chool and daycare closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have increased caregiving responsibilities for working parents,” with mothers of young children more likely to reduce their working hours to manage these dual demands than fathers. In highlighting these complexities, @Covid19-Quilt contributors show how the pandemic has made visible the structural and systemic factors that see women not only take on more domestic and caregiving responsibilities, but also become marginalised from the labour market as a result (Reichelt et al. 2020). However, as @tainsaith explores (see Fig.4) in their piece, for many spending more time at home with children was a rewarding challenge, and craft activities suddenly became important tools for home-schooling.

![Fig. 4. Home with children](https://example.com/home.jpg)

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

While the home was a sanctuary, a place of work, and/or a space of caregiving for some, for others, being confined to the home was a source of danger. As @cobbjulian’s piece depicts (see Fig. 5), for victims of domestic and family violence, being confined to the home is anything but a sanctuary; it is
a literal prison. As doctors, nurses, psychologists and criminologists noted, the social isolation measures put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 placed many at an increased risk of family and domestic violence, cut off from support services and trapped at home with their abusers (Usher et al. 2020a). One Australian study conducted with family and domestic violence support workers, for example, found evidence that “the incidence and severity of domestic violence has increased in Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions” (Pfitzner et al. 2020; see also Boxall et al. 2020), findings which are also reflected in available data from North and South America, Europe and Asia (Usher et al. 2020a). The urgent need for governments to respond to the immediate risks facing victims was a theme across a number of @Covid19Quilt contributions.

Fig. 5. Home as Threat
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

Additionally, As illustrated in Fig. 6, the way in which the pandemic has separated many from their families has resulted in some individuals existing in a liminal space, physically in one location but mentally and emotionally wishing to be elsewhere, hoping that at any moment travel and other restrictions might lift so they can be reunited with their families. With there being no clear end in sight to the pandemic, this liminality has had a growing emotional toll on those who have found themselves far from home during this pandemic. Separated by closed borders and without any indication of when travel (in particular international travel) will once again be possible, families long for the day when they will be reunited.
Health

Naturally, given the context of the pandemic, health was another common theme across contributions to the @Covid19Quilt project. The virus itself featured in a number of works, particularly as more became known about its characteristics and form. For example, @pleatybunny’s work (Fig. 7) uses thread and beadwork to depict the physical attributes of COVID-19 in comparison to other well-known viruses, such as influenza, while @nicole_p_oloughlin’s (Fig. 8) uses pom poms, french knots and tassels to depict the coronavirus cell itself. As those working in the social sciences, arts and humanities argue, paying attention to the sensorial allows us to gain an understanding of individual experiences that draw on knowledge beyond language (Pink 2015, 96-96).
Other contributions also demonstrated the differential ways in which countries were responding to the virus, and the various policies and practices that either facilitated or impeded access to personal protective equipment (PPE), testing and vaccination. While multiple submissions touched upon the protective and preventative measures that individuals were encouraged to take in public health campaigns designed to limit transmission, including the washing of hands (Fig. 9) and the wearing (and making) of masks (Fig. 10), some raised concerns about the provisions available to the community. Indeed, as Fig. 10 shows, many crafters took it upon themselves to produce their own cloth masks, with many donating masks to health professionals and community members where access to PPE was limited or expensive (Kipp, Kretz 2021).
In globalising the discussion and highlighting the inequities experienced around the world, the @Covid19Quilt is making visible the very real impacts that differential public healthcare systems have on communities around the world. Furthermore, the quilt is highlighting the difficulties some populations are experiencing in accessing information, and support and treatment for the virus, mirroring calls from scholars and the WHO to ensure poorer nations are provided safe and affordable access to healthcare and vaccination (Kamradt-Scott 2020).

Aside from the health concerns directly related to the virus itself, the @Covid19Quilt also captured adjacent mental health concerns generated or exacerbated by the virus on individuals, their family and friends, and the global community more broadly. As @leratomotaurartwork from Johannesburg, South Africa (Fig. 11) explains in her piece, there was a great deal of anxiety around the virus and how measures taken to control the spread would impact on people’s lives and mental health. Once again, such works shed light on the need for more awareness around the mental health impacts of the pandemic, and the need for better support from governments for those affected, echoing responses from experts and practitioners that “[r]ecover from the negative impacts of this pandemic must include plans for addressing mental health issues for both public and healthcare professionals” (Usher et al. 2020b: 316).
Another interesting element of health-themed submissions was the awareness raised by those suffering from chronic illness. A number of contributions detailed how those with pre-existing health conditions, invisible disabilities/illnesses, and mental health diagnoses were already well-accustomed with many of the circumstances ushered in by the pandemic, such as self-isolation and strict hygiene measures (see Fig. 12).

The emergence of the pandemic, therefore, was not the first time many have been confronted by uncertainty, confusion, isolation, and health concerns. As has become evident, for some such concerns were exacerbated by and during the pandemic, particularly in circumstances where ongoing health care was compromised by lockdowns and restrictions, something similarly noted by support agencies (e.g. see Rääbus 2020). Furthermore, workplace responses during the pandemic—such as allowing people to work from home—brought into sharp relief what is actually possible in terms of making adjustments and accommodations for individuals to work off-site, something those with disabilities had faced a degree of resistance to prior to the pandemic (Schur, Kruse 2020). In examining the way in which health emerged as a key theme in the @Covid19Quilt then, we are able to see the intersections between public and academic discourse around the health-related concerns during the pandemic.
In addition to documenting personal experiences and concerns around health, many contributors also paid tribute to the amazing work and contributions of health professionals in responding to the pandemic (see Fig. 13). Contributors recognised the enormous sacrifices being made by doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals on the front line, assisting those stricken by the virus, but also at the mercy of catching the virus themselves and continuing to work in such a precarious environment regardless. According to the World Health Organization, in the early period of the pandemic up to one in 10 health workers were infected with COVID-19 in some countries (Lacinda 2020) and hundreds have subsequently died (see Fig. 14), with reports suggesting “that black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) doctors were over-represented in early deaths” in the UK (Kursumovic et al. 2020, 989).
Such contributions served to underline the enormous pressures put on health services as the virus spread and also spoke to ongoing debates around government-funded health services and universal health care.

**Power**

The final theme woven through many of the contributions to the @Covid19Quilt project was that of power. One dimension of power evident in submissions related to the way in which the virus has been politicised. As this piece from @o_corcoran of North Carolina, US, exemplifies (Fig. 15), contributors to the quilt documented the growing scepticism about the existence of the virus and expressed frustration with those who refused to comply with health advice or take the virus seriously. These tensions were particularly heightened in countries where the virus was treated as a partisan issue rather than a global health emergency.

These observations tap into larger public discourses that argue ‘deep state’ conspiracy theories seeded doubt in the minds of some in the community, with some reports suggesting a large proportion of the community believe that the virus was either manufactured on purpose, or did not exist at all (Uscinski, Enders 2020). A national survey conducted by Yahoo News/YouGov, for example, “found that 31% of Americans thought the threat of the coronavirus was being exaggerated for political reasons during the early stages of the pandemic” (Kerr *et al.* 2021, 2).
It was not just in relation to COVID-19 itself though where power-relations were the focus of @Covid19Quilt submissions. The wider systems of governance that function to uphold oppressive practices and institutions also came into focus during the pandemic and within contributions to the project. While the pandemic might have illuminated a range of structural issues that had contributors and the broader public alike critiquing some governments and their institutions, concurrent events further fuelled community concerns. One incident in particular served as a catalyst for a social movement: the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in the US state of Minnesota in May 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic. The circulation of mobile phone camera footage depicting a White police officer kneeling on the neck of Floyd for eight minutes and 46 seconds, (re)ignited debates around differential policing and institutional racism, and led to ongoing Black Lives Matter protests in the US and around the globe (see e.g. Kirby 2020).

Unsurprisingly, in this climate, critiques and commentary on structural racism were apparent in a number of contributions to the @Covid19Quilt. As @nayking_88 details in her contribution (see Fig. 16), the death of George Floyd bought together Black, Indigenous and First Nations communities, who felt a sense of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly given the colonial histories of countries like Australia and New Zealand and their own experiences with police violence and deaths in custody.
Indeed, over time, the project increasingly became more than just a series of reflections on the individual experience of this pandemic, with participants contributing work that focussed on the growing number of power structures coming under criticism during this time. The growing momentum amongst social change movements calling for justice is exemplified by the work of @amorphophallus_titanium, who documented (see Fig. 17) that people were willing to risk their health during the pandemic to protest for the rights and treatment of Black communities in the US.

![Fig. 16. Black Lives Matter](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Fig. 16. Black Lives Matter**
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

![Fig. 17. Human Rights, Health and Black Lives Matter](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Fig. 17. Human Rights, Health and Black Lives Matter**
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram
The pandemic itself also revealed racism against other communities of colour, no doubt bolstered by the rhetoric of individuals such as outgoing US President Donald Trump, who continually referred to the Coronavirus as the ‘Chinese virus’ (Viala-Gaudefroy, Lindaman 2020). As @suyanhvisual writes in her contribution (see Fig. 18), the wearing of a face mask during the pandemic became politicised, and was a signifier for racist and xenophobic hatred. As one study from the Australian National University found, between January and October 2020, 84.5% of Asian Australians reported being discriminated against on at least one occasion (Biddle et al. 2020). Similarly, racially motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans have reportedly increased in the wake of COVID-19 (Gover et al. 2020, 647), with the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism finding a 146% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2020 across 26 US jurisdictions (Levin 2021, 2).

Fig. 18. Racism and COVID-19
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

The conversations raised by these submissions brought attention to the reality that while many politicians used the rhetoric that ‘we are all in this together’ the truth was that communities of colour, First Nations peoples, people with disabilities and other pre-existing conditions, and otherwise disadvantaged communities were disproportionately affected by this pandemic (World Health Organization 2020b). The devastating impacts of this unequal impact of the virus are repeatedly highlighted in the @Covid19Quilt including, as Fig. 19 highlights, the devastating death toll that has been a result of inadequate or neglectful government responses to addressing the virus (see also Shuster 2020).
Discussion and conclusion

As this discussion of the three key themes from the @Covid19Quilt demonstrates, through their digital contributions to the quilt, participants were able to articulate and share their thoughts on a wide variety of topics, ranging from very personal explorations of isolation, anxiety and grief (much of which was experienced in the home due to COVID-19 restrictions), to expressions of concern about systemic issues in relation to healthcare, racial equality, and politics/democracy. In this way, the @Covid19Quilt serves to facilitate “engagement with aspects of experience such as affect states and understandings of the relationship between self and others, past and present, the individual and the collective” (O’Neill and Seal 2021, 134).

As a cultural artefact, the quilt documents, in digital form, the complex and multilayered experience of living through a pandemic, giving voice to and putting into context similar issues being discussed in scholarly and political circles. In the words of Just and Fitzpatrick, the project serves as a digital space where “[...] we can reclaim our connection to each other by continuing to make things with our hands and by sharing stories that highlight our shared humanity” (Fitzpatrick 2020). In this way, the @Covid19Quilt provides a window into the socio-political context of the pandemic in ways that cut across cultural, linguistic, and geographic divides (O’Neill and Seal 2021). It bears witness to the very real impacts and reflections of living through
a pandemic. To draw on the work of education scholars Adeniji-Neill et al. (2014, 26), the project can be understood as providing a space for people to “see and feel cultural differences and commonalities” as represented in both the creations that people share and the maker’s statements which accompany these creations on social media.

Through its incorporation of physical craft based practices and peoples’ use of social media, this project exemplifies what criminologists Stratton et al. (2017, 24, 26) argue is the increased blurring between people’s online and offline worlds. As Stratton et al. point out, the digital society in which we now live has seen “a shift in structures, socio-cultural practices and lived experience that does not distinguish between the online and offline world,” a shift that amongst other things, “arguably better captures the lived experiences of marginalised communities and the operation of power, inequalities and violence across every aspect of their daily lives” (Stratton et al. 2017). Furthermore, the quilt’s digital form and the way it continues to grow over time, allows for a sustained engagement that enables contributors and audiences to expand their consciousness by participating in supranational conversations about these complex sets of issues. As a result, this project will provide those looking back on this moment in the future with a primary source that documents this pandemic through the viewpoints of everyday people around the world, a source that centres the stories and experiences of women who have historically been marginalised and excluded from the annals of history (see for example Hunter 2019).

Along with other digital creative participatory responses to this pandemic, the @Covid19Quilt project is collating significant records of first-person accounts of the pandemic. Artists Just and Fitzpatrick purposefully designed the project to encourage broad participation, and to “value and recognise the creative contributions of ‘non-artists’ and enable participants to communicate ‘their own truth’ in a public space” (Robson 2021). Through their hand crafted work and their use of social media to share and reflect their experiences, contributors to the @Covid19Quilt project are articulating their wider concerns about the personal, social, and political impacts of COVID-19, alongside other events that have (co-)occurred during this time.

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4 Within the scope of this project, which is bound by its reliance on the internet and Instagram, the project looks to mitigate barriers to participation by: 1) Translating and sharing the project brief in 15 languages, including Australian sign language. 2) Accepting submissions from people who don’t have Instagram accounts, accepting multiple submissions and accepting submissions in any language. 3) Only asking for images of the submitted artworks rather than the original artworks.
As our preliminary thematic analysis of this project reveals, the recurring themes raised in this work focus around the issues of home, health and power, with makers around the work using their contribution to the @Covid19Quilt as an outlet to reflect on, draw attention to, and even protest injustice, inequality, and the abuse of power. In this way, the @Covid19Quilt exemplifies how supranational communities use the public/private intersection of craft and digital technologies to narrate their histories and engage collective meaning making.

By examining the contributions to the @Covid19Quilt, what becomes clear is that the project operates on multiple levels, playing multiple functions, including: a platform through which individuals can advocate for and bring attention to specific social justice issues; a space for public conversations about complex often emotional issues; a time capsule of this significant moment in history as recorded by members of the global community; and a site for storytelling by those whose stories are often under-represented in the annals of history—women, people of colour, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, young people, people living with disabilities and/or chronic illness, as well as seniors. By exploring the themes that emerge in this project, this paper highlights the ways in which the @Covid19Quilt project is an important cultural artefact that draws together “threads of collective meaning and understanding” (Ferrell, Hayward, Young 2015, 3) and opens up possibilities for transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary dialogue. As such, it highlights how digital quilt projects can serve as cultural artefacts imbued with meaning, context and affect, and thus are a site ripe with meaning for interdisciplinary scholars wanting to gain new and interesting insights into the experience of living through a pandemic.

Bibliography


