



Cornell University

Cornell AAP Architecture Art Planning

Emergency Mode: Artist Jaret Vadera on Crises and Adaptable Art Practice



Vadera delivering hot food and groceries to immigrant families for Brooklyn Community Immigrant Support, an organization that collects and coordinates the distribution of supplies to hundreds of people in need. photo / provided

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When the Ithaca campus shut down in mid-March, Art Assistant Professor of the Practice Jaret Vadera went home to Brooklyn, New York — what was then the center of the largest outbreak of COVID-19 in the U.S. He and his students adjusted to virtual teaching across several time zones while he cared for family, neighbors, and friends during the public health crisis. A transdisciplinary new media artist, Vadera's work explores how different social, technological, and cognitive processes shape and control the ways that we see the world around and within us. Vadera has also been active as a curator, programmer, researcher, and designer on projects that focus on using art as a catalyst for social justice and change. He has been collaborating with grassroots organizations and think tank-style groups to discuss how to mobilize during COVID and address inequities amplified by the pandemic. Parallel to these discussions, Vadera volunteers to aid immigrant and undocumented neighbors as he considers different ways to "show up" and stay safe himself.

Vadera shared his thoughts with AAP on how he and other artists might participate in movements for change, and reflected on his critically engaged creative practice and how the pandemic and protests have affected his work.

How has the pandemic impacted your work? In April you said you had not been working on art, has that changed?

When the pandemic first hit, I went into emergency mode. Food, supplies, family, friends, and my students were my first priority. My creative energy shifted directly into teaching, cooking, and caregiving.

My art practice has always been adaptable. For me, being an artist isn't only about making things. It's about making things happen, and about being part of different communities of radical thinkers and doers.

I joined dozens of 'what-should-we-do-now?'-type groups. I have been reading articles, essays, and watching innumerable Zoom talks and panels about how to mobilize during COVID, and against anti-black racism; have been to protests, donated money, participated in a number of think tank-style conversations and radical re-imagining sessions; and, I have been delivering food and emergency supplies to undocumented families in my neighborhood.

What was the end of spring semester teaching like?

The end of last semester was difficult. It was challenging to figure out so much on the fly.

I had to be more flexible, equitable, and become more aware of how the pandemic was individually hitting a number of my students pretty hard. Some students returned home to additional caretaking responsibilities, difficult home lives, were in different time zones, or facing new financial constraints.

Both of my classes [Art, Culture(s), and Technology: Introduction to Digital Media; and Algorithms, Imaging, and Power] already had strong discussion components, so the tone we had set in the first part of the semester helped us transition into the second half. I tried to meet with my classes synchronously as much as possible. Though long Zoom sessions can sometimes be draining, I felt it was grounding for my classes and added a level of continuity and connection as students were now spread out across the country and around the globe.

In class, we had already been discussing the media, politics, and social issues in the U.S. and beyond. So, when we went virtual we were already primed to critically engage with what we witnessed unfolding all around us, in real-time, every day. We had passionate conversations about healthcare, race, class, politics, and disaster capitalism. This became an unexpected opportunity to directly respond to what was happening in the world, through class discussions, and through their work.

Living in Brooklyn, what has been your experience of the COVID crisis?

The pandemic has been surreal. Walking down the street where I live in Flatbush — everyone in masks, empty shelves, and long lines to buy food — has felt like I've been living in a dystopic sci-fi movie. A number of my friends, family members, and students have been sick. Most have made it through, but some have died. I never would have thought that I would have to attend a Zoom funeral before. In another way, it's been really nice to slow down and to see how parallel ways of organizing society have entered into mainstream discussions.

The pandemic has amplified many of the deep-rooted inequities built into every level of our society. There was a meme-image going around on social media of graffiti on a brick wall — "Corona is the virus, capitalism is the pandemic." Political posturing, an inequitable and prejudiced healthcare system, clickbait journalism, and

unaccountable racially-targeted policing have disproportionately punished the working class, black people, people of color, the elderly, indigenous, and undocumented communities.

I have actively tried to engage in small and immediate ways in all of the spaces I already occupy, while simultaneously working towards long-term structural change. I have been volunteering at an amazing local grassroots organization called [Brooklyn Immigrant Community Support](#), which has been delivering food and emergency supplies to undocumented families in my neighborhood.

I am in a higher risk category for COVID, and my partner, a filmmaker, wanted to make a short [documentary](#) about the elderly South Asian community in Queens during COVID. So, we have had some strategic next-level conversations about how we can both actively engage, remain connected, and "show up," while still being safe.

Can you share some thoughts on race as lived experience?

As people of color, we are confronted by prejudice and racism every day. Sometimes it is big, obvious, and immediate, and then sometimes it is so ubiquitous that it just feels like reality. Sometimes it is small, experienced through micro-aggressions, or when you repeatedly notice something is missing, or certain groups are conspicuously absent from the conversation.

The anti-Asian political rhetoric that was echoed in the streets during the pandemic was a daily reminder of how white supremacy, exclusionary nationalism, and antiimmigrant racist violence is lurking just beneath the surface. I was alarmed at how little people seemed to care.

Black and indigenous communities have been disproportionately affected by COVID. And when the New York City police started issuing social-distancing violations, black and brown communities were unfairly targeted in what many have connected to "stop and frisk."

The international Black Lives Matter protests are a reminder that people in this country, and around the world, collectively feel that enough is enough. That it is time to confront entrenched racism; to acknowledge the historical ways that policing has evolved in relation to black, brown, indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ communities; and to implement equitable and anti-racist systems that best serve our communities.

Talk about the future: teaching, creative and critical practice?

Critical thinking is crucial, now more than ever. We need to work harder to discern fact from fiction. We need to be vigilant when sifting through the unrelenting noise of the day, to think beyond binary polemics, and superficial quick fixes. We need to act now while committing to the long-game. The takedown and defacing of public monuments of Christopher Columbus, Leopold II, Robert E. Lee, and Winston Churchill, reminds us of the very real violence they enacted, and, signals a collective desire to break with racist colonial narratives. People around the world want to define a new future. As artists, we can amplify marginalized voices, hold up a mirror to society, creatively imagine a new one, and help build it together.

This is an important moment for all of us to honestly assess, reimagine, and implement deep changes. As artists, I believe we are uniquely positioned to radically reshape our society.

By Patti Witten