Fallow & Productive, Creativity & COVID-19
by Mirka Knaster

This year will certainly go down in history—world history and personal history. We each have a story to tell about how the pandemic has affected us and those we know. One of good fortune is about staying safe and healthy; one of misfortune is about getting sick and dying. I am grateful that other aspects are not so dire, not so black and white. In some recent discussions with friends who are also creatives, I have heard a variety of responses to the question, “How has Covid-19 affected your creativity?”


Some have been inspired to create new work. Others have spoken about a year of fallowness. It’s a term we rarely if ever hear in a culture devoted to—or better put, obsessed with—constant productivity. Take agribusiness: every acre and every creature must give maximum yield all the time, even though that is un-natural. Nature functions in cycles, and one part of that is rest, which leads to renewal. Traditionally, that was the way people understood cultivation: “And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and gather in the increase thereof; but the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie fallow…..” (Exodus 23:10-11)


Perhaps this year has offered some artists time to reflect, develop fresh ideas, even take a different direction. In one conversation, an installation artist shared that some of her best ideas come from boredom. Maybe being bored is akin to lying fallow. If we’re not constantly occupied, there’s an opportunity for the mind and body to take a breather. In that pause, regeneration becomes a possibility: new seeds can be planted and eventually harvested. But because fallow land is unproductive, it’s too easy to consider rest as laziness rather than as an antidote to exhaustion. On occasion, I’ve found myself wondering whether I’ve suddenly become a slug because I don’t have a whole new body of work to show. Too often, when we don’t see anything happening on the surface, we don’t realize that something could be growing quietly in the subterranean darkness.

The artist’s words about finding value in boredom struck me, especially since I’ve long considered myself someone who’s never bored—life is far too interesting! Plus, when is there time for boredom? All year I’ve received a plethora of invitations to attend Zoom conferences, meetings, interviews, panels, classes, presentations, exhibitions, concerts, and more. Certainly, many of them have been interesting, illuminating, informative, even entertaining. I greatly appreciate the unprecedented access to so much that would otherwise entail costly travel. But as my inbox fills up with these offers daily, I can’t help expressing some incredulity: “Do they think I’m just sitting here on my hands, bored to death?”

Yet after I read a book review in which the writer refers to a chapter on the “adaptive advantages of boredom,” I was intrigued by that term and decided to discover what those advantages are. From research in the behavioral sciences, I learned about the bright side of boredom. One particular benefit caught my attention: boredom can increase creativity and enable problem-solving by allowing the mind to wander and daydream, something we can’t do when we’re always on task. It seems that, in the absence of external stimulation (where today can we find ourselves without it?!), we’re more likely to use our imagination and to think in non-habitual ways.

Still, I’ve noticed that lying fallow sometimes leaves me uncomfortable because I experience so much fulfillment when I’m immersed in a project. I remind myself not to be afraid of fallowness for a while. Albert Einstein said: “Creativity is the residue of time wasted.” I interpret that to mean that we don’t really waste time just because we’re not engaged in producing something tangible.

Despite how much things have slowed down, I’ve been surprised at how quickly the year has flown by, though I’ve created only a few small pieces and a bunch of children’s quilts as donations to non-profits. While I’ve not been able to travel, I’ve journeyed deeper inside myself, exploring what I’d otherwise not have found the time for. Not going anywhere this year has led to an unanticipated fallowness, and I feel something stirring in it.

If you’ve experienced fallowness this year, I hope it will bear creative fruit when you’re ready for it. Remember these often-quoted lines? “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away....” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) Certainly 2020 has been a time of refraining from many things. Who knows where all this will lead us? Just as no one could predict that the Renaissance would follow the catastrophic bubonic plague—the "Black Death" that...
devastated half the population of Europe—we can’t foresee what might flourish after the Covid-19 pandemic.

La Nuit étoilée (Starry Night) (1888), by Vincent van Gogh. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Source: commons.wikimedia.org/

I’ll finish my posting during this crazy year with words from English poet David Whyte:

Our genius is to understand and stand beneath the set of stars present at our birth, and from that place, to seek the hidden single star, over the night horizon, we did not know we were following.

May 2021 be a year in which you find that star, your star. And may it be a Happy and Healthy New Year for everyone. If you’ve not seen this video on Quarantine through Art, I hope it will put a smile on your face as you say goodbye to 2020 and greet 2021.

Questions & Comments:
What has 2020 been like for you creatively?
What has inspired you to produce new work?
Or has it been a fallow period—intentionally or unintentionally?
Are ideas for new projects germinating?