

The Sound(s) of Unrest: A Glimpse of Protest in Elana Mann's *Year of Wonders*

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Year of Wonders by Elana Mann

In the novel *Year of Wonders*, author Geraldine Brooks wrote a historical fiction inspired by the 1666 pandemic plague in England, which required a small Derbyshire village to quarantine itself in order to keep the community spread of illness from reaching beyond its borders. Brooks' background as a journalist in Australia grounds the extensive research behind the story and allows her to depict the journey of a young woman grappling with a new world of loss, and observing her community dwindle under forced isolation.

In a profound way, the artist Elana Mann has likewise created a powerful series of works during her Artpace residency that both holds the namesake of Brooks' novel as its title, and connects to a contemporary moment that has been similarly struck by a fatal disease and a political arena under monumental distress. Elana Mann's *Year of Wonders* reflects in a visual and sonic way, ethnographic views or field notes into a world that is in a state of great uncertainty, and describes the civil and social unrest that is informed by a global pandemic, racial injustice, and a presidential election that appeared to completely divide the United States.

As an artist who explores the listening and speaking practiced within everyday life, Elana Mann's work not only bridges sculpture, performance, community engagement, and politics but is the perfect case study to investigate the political nuances that continue to shape the world during the year 2020 and beyond. Mann's sculpturally, sonic works captured the words, sounds, and experiences of activism through the making of ceramic

instruments. While Mann typically displays these sound sculptures in collaboration with musical artists, the global pandemic presented a peculiar change for artists like Mann whose artistic practices lean towards social engagement that activates and brings life to her sculptures. Such a challenge was global for most social practice artists, resulting in worldwide conversations on the role of the artist during a global pandemic and reshaping resources for community-based art-making. In this way, Mann was presented with an ethical dilemma to consider how to create opportunities for engagement that would not risk the spread the virus. Nonetheless, Elana Mann's *Year of Wonders* sought to explore the complicated process of documenting what the art and sound of global unrest, isolation, and abandonment looks like in such a challenging year like 2020.

For Mann, the common story of how to translate one's engaged practice during a pandemic is also a transdisciplinary one. From artists, musicians, cultural works and beyond, there was the normalcy of how to continue one's relevancy under a cultural and creative economy--the gig universe—while continuing to work within the confinement and the realities of the COVID-19 corona virus. Like Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders*, we saw creatives, part-time/full-times workers and more suddenly without jobs or income to support their work. Our society has been forced to stand and witness the ways in which the pandemic has disrupted our social and cultural lives, not only prohibiting opportunities for community and gathering but also the dismantling of small businesses and community resources.

Mann's answer to this challenge was to examine her studio practice in the same way that many businesses and organizations were forced to re-orient the way they interact with the public. Like the endless emergence of "curbside pick-up" during the pandemic, Mann had to think about ways that visitors could engage with her art, including an additional process for the sterilization and sanitation of her protest rattles, *Unidentified Bright Objects #11-60*.

So much of Elana Mann's past work has been informed by musicians like the late Tejana composer Pauline Oliveros who championed the idea of "deep listening": where one listens to everything in every possible way. One can see and hear Mann listening intently at the current state of the world in order to bring clarity to what it all means. Equally, Mann is also highly intentional about its visualization of protest through community organizing, where she has been trained through workshops such as the Non-Violent Communication Council and the Industrial Works of the World community. In so many ways, Mann is recreating materials that inform the political activities that are practiced by everyday people, including her own personal activism. For *Unidentified Bright Objects #11-60*, the artist ultimately created individually crafted maracas inspired by her own experiences of making small sound sculptures for activism purposes, allowing

sound to intervene in ways that the human voice cannot. Mann created unique sounds for each object, which she hoped could speak to the language and linguistics of protest.

In addition to the fifty protest rattles on display, Mann also displayed a larger six-person protest horn, *Our work is never done (unfinished business)* that had been created originally prior to the pandemic. Mann had been hesitant to complete the work because of the risk that it would become a COVID-19 "super spreader." The large sonic sculpture was designed very much in the methodology of Mann's prior sound sculptures to be played collaboratively and performed. While the prospect of displaying her sonic horn as sculptural object for contemplation was different than her usual practice, the Artpace residency presented Mann with the opportunity to deeply consider the emotional struggle of not being able to touch people and things in the current moment, and how the feel of a gentle embrace or collaboration has been subjected to our memories and to the future. In a sense, the sculpture is in waiting and in preparation for a public that will be ready when COVID-19 herd immunity arrives.

Elana Mann's *Year of Wonders* presents new questions and solutions for art in the years to come that we can all learn and grow from. For obvious reasons, *Our work is never done* presented for Mann the greatest dilemma of considering how very rarely artists have to question human liability in their work. With the exception of the safety protocols inherent within art-making due to air quality, chemicals, and equipment, much of the visitor's experience with art objects is left to chance. In this way, much of our conversations about social responsibility within art has been limited to context, interpretation, or the risk that humans and the environment place on artworks. For Mann's *Year of Wonders* exhibition, it becomes clear that the year 2020 has presented us with radical opportunities in the field. By turning the experience of art on its head, we are challenged to examine not only risks as a result of the pandemic but also how social transformation might be reimaged under a new world order: one where social and cultural welfare and the lives of others become our highest priority.

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