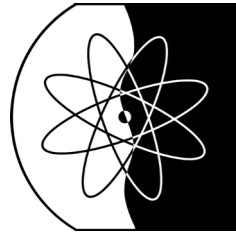


Morgan Quaintance is a London-based writer and artist. Born in South London, he is a regular contributor to Art Monthly, and has written for The Guardian, The Wire and other publications. His moving image work has been exhibited widely, and was recently awarded the 2021 Jean Vigo Award for Best Director at Punto de Vista film festival, Spain.

This writing accompanies a day of screenings of two of his films, *Another Decade* (2018) and *Surviving You, Always* (2020). In response Morgan also leads an open discussion using, as a starting point, the practical conditions, and personal and professional obligations surrounding the production of both works. Central to the conversation will be questions of survival, energy conservation and maintaining inspiration within systems of constraint or potential liberation in the 2020s.



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The socio-cultural meaning of precarity has taken on a totally new dimension following a year of lockdown restrictions and forced isolation caused by Covid 19. Before it seemed to be a sociological term that gradually moved into wider and more informal usage. For the most part, it referred to the general existential state of insecurity that large numbers of people found themselves living through under a 21st century neoliberal regime. The idea invoked was that we, as a society, had moved through the mid-century promise of job security and collective responsibility, and emerged alone and accountable in a system that, behind all the libertarian verbiage about freedoms and choice, promoted individual responsibility and 'flexibility' (for which read insecurity) above all else. Now our notions of societal instability have stretched beyond personal, familial or community scales of economic uncertainty to include global states of emergency, waves of plague-like illness, and mass deaths.

The fate of individual artists might seem slight in the face of such dramatic and world scale developments, and to be honest, it is. But the mental push and pull between levels of concern, between thinking about personal responsibility and self-care on the one hand, and a global conscience or consciousness on the other, has been the psychological dilemma keenly felt by many artists, especially those lucky enough to be confined to studios or relatively secure domestic environments. That, in any case, has been the state of my own condition for the past year and a quarter. This back and forth between modes of thinking about the particular and (I suppose what might be called) the universal has been the psychological backdrop against which all the normal stresses and strains of contemporary living have, at times, been raised to unusually high pitches.

It's probably now something of a banal truism to say sustained restrictions have forced many to 'reflect' on their

lives, or their positions in the world. So, when I was invited to write something about precarity and the present moment, I initially struggled with the idea that I'd be contributing one more set of boring observations about that dynamic to add to the number of self-indulgent, introspective think pieces and features that are either clogging the web or covering magazine column inches. Instead, I'm going to talk through an experience of physiological fragility; about how it felt like a bodily experience of precarity, an experience that I'm not sure I've learned anything significant from, but that has nevertheless made me strengthen my resolve to exist in the most emphatic way I know how: by being a creative individual.

I was never properly diagnosed, but I think I had Covid 19 in February 2020; caught while I was in Rotterdam for its international film festival that month. Although I wasn't in the competition that year, my film *Missing Time* was shown twice. The festival paid for my travel, accommodation, and breakfast, and so I was in the city for about three or four days. Back then I was just beginning to show work internationally and the experience of travelling to a different country to spend time meeting other filmmakers and watching mind bending films all day was a revelation. My days went like this: wake up, eat the free breakfast, book free tickets to films, watch films, meet friends old and new, go to a bar, eat dinner, sleep, wake up and do it all again. It was a kind of filmmaker's paradise. Then, on the last day I woke up at four in the morning with a pounding headache, aching muscles and the loudest ringing in my ear that I've ever experienced. My body felt so sensitive that water from the shower hurt when it touched my skin. I'm not sure how I did it, but I managed to drag myself to the train station and then make the two interchanges necessary to get from Rotterdam to London St Pancras. That evening I arrived home, collapsed into bed and didn't get out of it for four days.

At the time I thought it was just a bad case of the flu; in hindsight the symptom profile was a match for coronavirus.

I felt those same symptoms again over a year later, after I was given the first Astra Zeneca jab in April. 'You might experience some mild flu-like symptoms', said the nurse who slid the needle in my arm as I looked the other way. 'Here, read this' a young boy in army fatigues said afterwards, handing me a leaflet with a list of 'common side effects' printed on it. I'd had vaccination shots for travelling in parts of the world where Yellow Fever and other viruses are still a problem, and so I thought I knew what I was in for. This time it was different.

The next morning, I was up at four again, plagued with the same set of symptoms I'd felt in a Rotterdam hotel over a year ago. Over the next few days, I'd swing between periods of feeling well and long episodes of nausea, mild but persistent headaches, feelings of detachment, and an ambient sense of low-level depression. I was in the process of working on a new film commission, finishing off some writing commitments and (lucky for me) dealing with the day-to-day admin of an artist whose moving image works are in film festival circulation. The most difficult aspect of this brief period was that as a freelancer I was having to think up working opportunities for the following year, identify possible sources of funding or institutional support and then go after them. The problem was, I had no enthusiasm or passion to drive me through what is, even at the best of times, often a dull and dispiriting process. Then the fatigue set in.

A couple of weeks after the vaccination side effects died down, I was feeling really tired. By about three or four in each afternoon I was physically and psychologically spent. I fought against it for a while, but then I realised I'd have to start cancelling work obligations and turning down new opportunities. Calls were made and emails sent. At first it felt liberating, but the tiredness remained,

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worsened even. In addition, I began to feel the familiar sensation in my limbs of what is called paresthesia (a mix of numbness, tingling and flu-like skin sensitivity). They're common symptoms of the autoimmune condition I have called multiple-sclerosis, and so I had to admit that this might be a relapse. As a 'sufferer' I'm in the privileged position of having the relapsing and remitting form of the condition, which is basically a way of saying there are periods when I'm well and periods when I'm not, and these wax and wane a bit like the tides. When I'm well my memory of the condition becomes so faint it seems like I've never had it, like it was something I'd imagined. When I have periods where fatigue and paresthesia set in, the solid reality of my physiological condition is so profound it's life changing.

At these points there's always a period of assessment that has to take place. I have to determine if this is a moment when short-term management of my discomfort is necessary or is it a moment where the symptoms will remain, and a more long-term alteration of my life has to take place. I started with the short-term. Because I'd lost track of who my neurologist was, I had to start by rifling through old out-patient letters to find the various numbers I'd need to find her. My assigned MS nurse had been replaced by someone new as well, and so I had to find out who she was now too. Then I had to scramble to get myself back on the meds that I'd stopped taking for about a year.

'How much of the medication do you have left?' the suppliers asked over the phone. 'None' I replied.

'When did you last have a consignment from us Mr Quaintance?'

'About a year ago'

'Sorry?'

'About a year ago'

'...you've not taken the medication for a year'

'Erm... yeah.'

During this process I was seriously thinking about what I'd have to do to

manage things if they didn't get better. Cold weather is difficult for me, so I'd have to move to a hot country. Maybe I'd have to get a single level place to stay if stairs got tricky. Those were the sorts of practical considerations running through my mind. Then I began to get better.

That period of what may have been a relapse again feels like a distant memory to me now. But what has remained more vivid is the fear I felt when faced with the possibility that I may not be able to continue to make work. This was a realisation I faced from a purely practical level, but it was the psychological alteration that was the scariest. To not feel like making work, to not have the passion or enthusiasm to consume or create art was like a kind of existential death sentence to me, and it could have been a real one too. Art (and I mean this in its most expanded sense of including music, dance, literature, theatre, film and the so called 'fine' arts) has always been a central part of my life. From wanting to be a musician so badly that it hurt to watch other live bands on stage, to bunking off secondary school to spend days watching classic films like *Clockwork Orange* or breaking into the *Streatham Odeon* to watch the latest releases for free, I always knew I wanted to, no, had to be a part of that select group of people who not only consumed culture, but made it too.

Sometimes it's easy to forget that history of desperation. It's easy to forget that feeling of being a working-class teenager with a passion, but not necessarily the greatest odds of making that passion a reality. Complacency, in other words, is easy to slip into. But, if there is anything approaching a positive side-effect in the precarious back and forth of a relapsing and remitting condition, it is the experience of 'getting a second chance' of being on the brink of having to sacrifice the thing that you love, and then being able to return to it with a renewed sense of purpose and urgency.