

When Walls Close In

An essay on the potential of limits to inspire innovation

Danielle Smelter

I still remember sitting on the couch, alone, trying to get a new baby to sleep, too scared to move in case I woke them once they slept - more hours alone on the couch. Hours and hours stuck at home, cut off from everyone and everything that had comprised my world only a few days previously.

A few days into this experience I learned to keep my phone within reach for some single-handed distraction. Inevitably I would forget occasionally, and so I upskilled, inching my body ever so gently to the end of the couch. Extending my leg, I would knock my phone off the coffee table and drag it across the floor until I could pick it up.

By the time I welcomed my second child I could do most things with my feet. I no longer missed the use of my hands. A phone left out of reach was deftly lifted between the vice like grip of two toes. I had adapted.

At the beginning of work from home directives I saw Michelle Hamer's *Day 7423* pop up on my Instagram feed. Her message instantly resonated. I, too, felt I was navigating somewhat familiar terrain.



Michelle Hamer, *Day 7423* (2020), hand stitching wool on canvas, 17 x 20 cm.

Michelle Hamer turned to needlepoint while isolated at home for a protracted period due to illness. Her practice draws upon her familiarity with the built environment, gleaned from professional experience as an architect. Her stitched road signs and advertising slogans highlight her awareness of the tensions underlying individual versus public concerns, tensions that have come into rapid relief during the Covid-19 crisis.

For Hamer, illness and isolation became a generative force, establishing an art practice that pursues a fascination with the slippage around public and private accountabilities. I share her fascination with politics of the public and private divide, it has formed the focus of my recent research which probed at questions of receptivity and acceptability for private concerns in public dialogue. The current en masse migration of the public into the private has suddenly created a space of broad receptivity for reflection on the structural interface of our public and private lives.

As quarantine and work from home directives roll on, barriers between the private and public realms are flexing. The façade of professionalism and individualism has incrementally diminished for those economically fortunate enough to translocate their work life into their private space. Forced investment by industry to relocate productivity into employees' private spaces holds ongoing possibilities for some, who rub up against structural limitations and barriers to work from home arrangements every day.

Many individuals who have encountered limitations to accessing public space in pre-Covid times offer valuable insight for our current climate. In early April, HowlRound Theatre Commons hosted an event [*It Was Always Possible: Centering the Leaders Who Were Here All Along*](#). While the majority scrambled to find new ground, this event acknowledged that these challenges have already been met in a myriad of ways that have perhaps failed to gain traction due to a lack of shared experience.

Beyond the limiting political structure of the private sphere sit the limitations inherent within our interpersonal relationships. While my own practice has grappled with addressing private concerns without encroaching upon the privacy of others, the interpersonal can generate creative responses via other means. Interactions between individuals or communities activate points of difference and tension, which can be a barrier to communication or generate a space of creativity. Often the divide is not clear cut, it involves a period of evolution.

Artist Emmaline Zanelli has been developing a creative project in collaboration with her Nonna, responding to the idea of legacy by drawing upon the aesthetics of industrial manufacturing labour and domestic labour. Zanelli initially created elaborate digital collages of elements related to her Nonna's experience as a migrant worker in a textile factory in Adelaide. But she recounts how her Nonna failed to recognise herself in the abstracted representation of the collages. Realising the work needed to be accessible to her Nonna, a new collaborative approach generated a series of captivating video works in which her Nonna is not only visually recognisable but becomes an active agent and collaborator. The generative force of her Nonna's divergent visual language proved a transformative moment for the project.

The first video work to result from the shift in methodology was [Untitled \(Life Cycle of a Skype Call\)](#) 2019.



Emmaline Zanelli, *The Cyclist (Dynamic Drill for Sustained International Connection)* 2019, digital video (EXCERPT)

The fluctuating power generated through the exercise bike imbues a sense of urgency to the attempt to communicate and connect that aligns deeply with the current shelter at home climate. The hampered conversation resonates physically with anyone who has had to endure Zoom, Webex or Google Meet communications in recent weeks.

As we live through this time of new and shifting limits the natural tendency is perhaps to focus on contracting opportunities, a kind of grieving for lost ground. But limitations can be a catalyst for new forms and new conversations. I'm interested to explore the possibilities fixed boundaries present for innovation and whether innovation can operate to transcend our understanding of the fixity of these boundaries.

Links to artists' websites:

[Michelle Hamer](#)

[Emmaline Zanelli](#)