

# DIARY OF A BAD YEAR

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On the occasion of Ellen Ogawa's residence at Leo XIII, Tilburg  
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I first met Ellen in her studio in Tilburg on 13 March, 2020. *Gastatelier* Leo XIII had asked me to act as a “mediator” for Ellen’s work during her residence period, March–June. She and I had had some preliminary contact, but that was the first time we were meeting in person. My intent for the day was double: on the one hand, to learn about the work I was supposed to mediate; on the other, to figure out what “mediating” actually meant in this context, since I never considered myself a curator or writer. As far as I was concerned, I was an artist trying to help a fellow artist.

2020 will be remembered as an *anno horribilis* due to the coronavirus outbreak and its associated effects: confinement, social isolation, and the fear of reduced freedom and movement. The costs of the pandemic are going to affect not only public health and social rights to an unprecedented scale but will also result in a serious economic impact of unknown consequences. A new crisis is looming right when the world was coming out of the previous one, with massive unemployment and governmental cutbacks in essential services soon returning.

A main reference in Ellen Ogawa’s art project is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a work that is usually credited with having introduced Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century. The book is meant to be a guide to life after death. Those who have died transition from their former life to a new destination, namely liberation and enlightenment. The travel toward what is described as “light” and the ultimate Buddhahood is no easy task and requires preparation. The body is seen as an instrument for this journey; practicing yoga is an essential part of such preparation.

After the studio visit, I went to catch a bus to Antwerp. I live and work in Rotterdam but often commute to Belgium, where my wife works. That day I learned that the COVID-19 pandemic was a tangible reality: my bus, along with a lot of trains, had been canceled. It took many hours and great effort to reach Antwerp and, once I did, I didn't leave for the next three months: the border was closed, confinement was prescribed, and the whole population was put in quarantine.

A good part of the population, however, perceive the reality of the pandemic through the news that they get via mass media. They know of its existence because they are told about it; they read the daily rising figures of new infections and casualties, awakening their social consciousness and solidarity with the virtual victims. But they cannot relate to it in any direct way; they experience it mainly as an obligation to spend weeks in confinement, as required by law.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* proposes broadening our understanding of life and death; “the now” is described as a state of transformation between different interconnected moments. The importance of preparing for the afterlife is addressed through the practice of meditation and yoga. Possible negative experiences (as well as positive ones) can grow limitlessly. The thought of an infinite hell is terrifying; yet by preparing in an intelligent way, the soul will transition gracefully. Gaspar Noé’s film, *Enter the Void*, is an astonishing representation of this journey.

The virus outbreak and subsequent lockdown, with its social distancing measures, had a disturbing effect on Ellen's creative process. Previously, we had discussed punctuating the four-month residency with public moments, rather than only a final presentation, as a way to involve audiences and emphasize process and transformation. However, distance and isolation were prevailing conditions now; groups of more than three people were forbidden. The impossibility of moving freely or meeting with others put an end to this idea.

For many, the whole situation has been lived as something inconvenient, uncomfortable, or annoying. Being locked down at home is experienced as a frustrating episode, perhaps mildly stressing. Boredom seems to be the predominant emotion among significant portions of the population. Suddenly finding themselves apart from their work environment (telework does not compensate for the loss of workload), they find new ways to distract themselves from the tedium of spending day after day at home.

In 2012, when the SARS outbreak reached India, renowned yoga master, B.K.S. Iyengar, developed an immune-system yoga sequence, specifically conceived so his students could continue training while the institute where he taught was closed. Iyengar's "Dead Man's Pose" is associated with resting. After having performed a sequence of yoga, one should always finish in this particular pose. Comfortably on the ground, enjoying the fruits of the practice, one allows the body to restore, aware of the surroundings. "The now" is experienced as contemplation by doing absolutely nothing and expecting nothing to happen.

Ellen was understandably frustrated by the fact that the pandemic was undermining the conditions necessary for production of her work: materials, collaboration, audience, and human interaction were all lacking. However, we kept talking remotely, via Internet, until we decided to turn the seemingly disadvantageous conditions into a generative force. If I understand the principles of aikido correctly, it consists in using the energy of your attacker against himself; its philosophy is based on turning a negative impulse in your favor. We still wanted to stick to the original idea and reach out to audiences throughout the residency. If not in person, it could be done in a telematic manner. That's how the idea of a livestreamed, yoga-based performance, called *Be Her(e)*, emerged.

Meaningless challenges proliferate in social media, with the sole objective of killing an excess of free time (post your favorite ten movies, books, etc.). Some people, more audacious, come up with such ideas as a line of "Corona make-up," an abundance of "Corona art exhibitions," and even the publication of *Corona Cookbook*, *Bestiary of Corona Animals*, and *The COVID Prince* (a cartoon adaptation of *The Little Prince*).

Significantly, a Facebook group called "Creative with Corona" says in its first post: "I'm bored to death, and I thought: can't we do something creative with this quarantine misery?"

*Plastic Matrix* is the name of the performance marking the end of Ellen's residency at *gastatelier* Leo XIII in Tilburg. It will take place in her studio, against the backdrop of the artworks that she's created during the last four months: mural paintings, sculptures, costumes, and a performance in collaboration with actress Lydia Muijen. The room will be split by a large drawing, mounted on a frame like a partition screen, which allows the performance to take place simultaneously in each subdivision of the space inhabited by Ellen and by Lydia. The tempo of the piece is structured by Lydia's recitation of "The Root Verses of the Six Betweens," a prayer excerpted from *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*, that's meant to guide the soul of the traveler in its transition from life to death.

In his artist's novel, *The Extras*, Ben Danckaert explains aikido: "The beauty of this movement (when it works) is indescribable. The simplicity with which the energy of the attacker is employed to floor them in a kind of rotating dance has something magical. You take the negative energy of your aggressor's attack into your own movement and turn it to your own strength, yin becomes yang, negative becomes positive, the shadow becomes light, and the latent becomes visible. Once you understand this movement (I mean in the figurative sense) you start to see this negative energy as something you can use; after all, through the right 'dance' movements you can turn it to your own strengths, a true advantage in the fight we call life."

The reality of the pandemic has hit some more brutally than others. On 17 April, my mother passed away because of COVID-19. Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges said that pain doesn't belong to metaphysics. When I think of the pandemic I cannot think in terms of abstract numbers of deaths, infections, and recoveries around the world, or picture the social and economic consequences in my mind. All I can think is that I was talking to my mother a mere few weeks ago and now I won't see her again. She was called María.

Ellen once had a dream that originated a sculpture called *The Lucid Dream*, reminiscent of an altar made of glass and mirrors. In her own words: "In the dream, I was in an unknown studio, just being there. The wall behind me started to change and, as if wiping some dirt off its surface from the other side, my friend began to appear. She was cleaning what instead of a wall turned out to be a glass, which was now becoming transparent enough to show her face and hands. I interpret the image of a wall turning into a window as a metaphor for expanding one's view."

The idea of a yoga session led by Ellen was meant to relieve some of the numbness and staleness that affect body and mind after weeks of seclusion. Yoga can be practiced on your balcony, terrace, or in your living room. The intention was that everyone who connected to the livestream could participate in it from their homes. The performance included orally delivered textual elements, coming from both yoga practice and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It was true that, at the time, there was a proliferation of livestreamed yoga classes aimed to fulfill a similar goal, and that, in such a context, Ellen's could be confused with another one. But yoga fundamentally connects with the contents of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which was at the center of Ellen's project during her residency at Leo XIII.

It wasn't her time yet, that's for sure. Certainly, living until age 87 is something I'd sign up for any time, but in her case there was still plenty of vital energy to keep her going for many years. This was notable about her: even though her life had been marked by tragedy, she always maintained a positive attitude, always looking toward the future. Not that her past was a nice place to relive, anyway. The night of 4 October, 1936, her father was executed during the Spanish Civil War. Men came to their home looking for him; he was arrested and never came back; he was shot a few hours later. He was 38 years-old; my mother was three. I still don't know with certainty the location of the mass grave where he's buried, nor the reason why he was taken away, though there's evidence to suggest that he was killed by mistake.

The name of the piece that I described as a "partition screen" is *The Gate* (a drawing mounted on a metal frame on wheels, so that the simultaneous realities of the two rooms it separates can be reunited at some point during the performance). It depicts a central mandorla from which six long arms emerge, accompanied by eight little characters, each of their bodies marked with seven chakras. The drawing is inspired by a passage from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which describes the "Heruka Buddhas" as "fierce deities of various wisdom colors" with "three faces, six arms, and four legs," and with the power to destroy any obstacles to enlightenment. These are important allies because, as Ellen says, "not being prepared for the journey might sour your trip."

From Leo XIII's press release: "Join artist Ellen Ogawa in her video streaming performance *Be Her(e)*. Intended as a moment of union and celebration in spite of the enforced physical distancing, this performance will show and guide the viewer through a flow of movement. Bending forward activates the intestine, twisting to the sides gives the kidneys a squeeze: you can relieve yourself from staleness, all you need to do is connect to the Facebook Live event on this very same page on 8 April, 18.00, and have your yoga mat ready."

María was living in Spain, in a nursing home. She moved there two years ago against my objections. But I turned out to be wrong: there, she had her own private room, an in-house doctor, physiotherapist, organized excursions, and so on. After a whole life spent taking care of others, she was now taken care of, and she really enjoyed it. This new life, which I thought would mean seclusion, meant liberation for her. Her health improved, and so did her state of mind. But, when one of the nursing home's workers entered the building with the virus, they found out too late. At first, María manifested mild symptoms, a slight temperature that kept rising slowly but relentlessly. Two weeks later, she was taken to the hospital with pneumonia. One week after that she passed away.

Ellen and Lydia will be wearing costumes with a snakeskin pattern. Earlier, in the image that accompanied the announcement of Ellen's previous performance, *Be Her(e)*, she had posed with snakeskin-patterned trousers. In the context of *Plastic Matrix*, these clothes bring to mind the snake as an animal that sheds skin to allow further growth and get rid of parasites that may have attached to the shed skin, a strong image that emphasizes the idea of passage from one state to the next one, from life to death and from death to life.

On 27 June, Ellen’s final presentation at Leo XIII is taking place, a durational performance called *Plastic Matrix*. Many elements that have been developed during her residency will find a final expression then – also those learned through the experience of carrying out *Be Her(e)*. By the end of June, some of the earlier lockdown restrictions will have been lifted, so that it is possible to plan a combination of a live event (following the “1.5 meter” policy of social distancing) and a video livestream that will broadcast a screen split into three simultaneous images: two from fixed cameras showing contiguous spaces in the studio, and a third from a free-moving camera that will show details of sculptures, mural paintings, and performed actions.

Apart from the obvious fact that she died, the most frustrating thing is the way she died. In Spain, access to hospitals was forbidden, as they had become a major site of contagion. So, even if I could have traveled from Belgium (which I couldn’t), I wouldn’t have been able to be with her. She was alone in her room until the end. A volunteer connected me with her via Skype for a few minutes each day, so that I could see her and try to talk to her. Also, every day I received a medical report describing her condition. But it only confirmed the deterioration that I could clearly discern on my screen. One day, when I saw the state she was in, I knew it was going to be her last. I don’t think she was aware of me saying goodbye.

The references to death in Ellen’s work, seen through the lens of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, may ring metaphysical at times, even mystical (such as in the mural depicting Yama, the Buddhist lord of death). However, in the context of the current COVID-19 outbreak, death is not an abstract idea to reflect on, but a brutal reality that has assaulted us, manifestly unprepared. Death has come in massive numbers not seen in a long time. But even such shocking figures still feel somewhat abstract, metaphysical, unless death has struck you directly with a painful loss. The daunting scenario of the pandemic locates the relevance of Ellen’s preoccupation with navigating the passage to death and learning to prepare for it.

This is the “new normal,” and this is how Ellen has been able to open new ways for the production and reception of her work. That which first was reason for frustration and isolation became the basis of experimentation within novel conditions. Some members of the audience will be part of the performative experience in the flesh, while others will follow it from a distance. This is more than a solution to a problem: *Plastic Matrix* establishes a new bond with its public, thanks to the mediation of a video livestream devised to guide the viewer’s gaze through the performance’s choreography. When direct contact with the one you want to reach isn’t possible, digital live communication might be the closest way to reach each other.

In Ancient Mesopotamia, in order to achieve peace in the afterlife, it was necessary to repeat a ritual by which an appointed kin would invoke the names of the deceased out loud on the darkest night of the month. Failing to utter a dead person’s name meant that person would be erased from the tablets of destiny, resulting in total annihilation. In more contemporary terms, we often say that one dies twice: the day that you reach your biological limit, and the day the last person who remembered you dies (or forgets you). With the invention of writing in Mesopotamia, the need for such a ritual ceased, because the inscription of the name, as a visual instruction for the production of sounds, contained the potential of its utterance in the lips of future readers. Memory is all that’s left of María. Because I write, I won’t let her disappear.

Ellen says that Tibet, by having the highest altitude on Earth, puts people in close contact with the sky; perhaps that’s the reason for their particular conception of death as a passage to life. Transition and transformation: *Plastic Matrix* marks the end of Ellen’s residence at Leo XIII while simultaneously being a moment in her practice at large. I was fortunate to accompany her through the flux of her creative process, witnessing the trajectory from her (lucid) dreams to the actualization of the work. Adverse conditions of production dictated the materialization of her ideas. The artist is entitled to daydream; this is a fundamental stage in any artistic process. Playing out her dream in reality results in what the rest of the world perceives as art.