

***Dis/Connect* – a virtual art exhibition by students of Miyazaki International College and Kyoto University of the Arts**



Will Hall
Miyazaki
International
College
Email:
<whall@sky.miyazaki-mic.ac.jp>



Eric Luong
Kyoto University
of the Arts
Email:
<eluong@kua.kyoto-art.ac.jp>

Dis/Connect: virtual art exhibition is an online project featuring the artworks of students from Miyazaki International College (MIC) and Kyoto University of the Arts (KUA). The project was organized from August to September 2020, and the works are currently available to view online. Featured artworks span a wide range of media, including photography, illustration, graphic design and video. The theme of the exhibition was distance and isolation, as they relate to the ongoing pandemic.

Motivations and Goals

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, which coincided with the beginning of the university school year in Japan, many universities moved their classes online (MEXT, 2020). Students took classes in the form of live Zoom sessions, Google Meets, or through on demand resources. However, with extra-curricular activities being cancelled, this move to online teaching drastically changed university life and narrowed the breadth of student experience (Cohen, 2020). There were two main reasons for beginning the *Dis/Connect* exhibition project: to provide an opportunity for international exchange (and thereby practice English) and use art to share experiences during the pandemic.

Both MIC and KUA have international exchange programs that were suspended due to the pandemic. All second-year students at MIC have the opportunity to study abroad, while students at KUA can apply to study abroad for one semester. With study abroad no longer possible, the *Dis/Connect* exhibition project aimed to provide exchange between international and Japanese students using capabilities of suddenly very familiar video conferencing software. An open-call to participate was sent via email to students at both schools in August 2020, and finally 21 students of five nationalities in three countries decided to join. The project was run completely in English, and outside of regular class time, giving students the chance to maintain their English skills throughout the summer holiday. Communication was done via email and two Zoom meetings were held before the opening of the exhibition. The opening day also included an online reception on Zoom where students introduced their works.

The *Dis/Connect* exhibition project was partly based on +Project (Plus Project), an international student group at KUA. Every year, international and Japanese students work together to create art exhibitions, artist talks, and other events. This is a student-centered project, also run in English, whereby planning, design, and same day operations are done by students. One result of this project is that students could use English outside of the classroom and make international friends. Many have gone on to study abroad. In the same spirit, the *Dis/Connect* exhibition project aimed to promote interaction between Japanese and international students.

During the first semester of online classes in 2020, there was a concern that the students were feeling isolated (Okutsu, 2020). Many did not have any plans for the summer and some reported that they missed meeting friends and social interaction. Extra-curricular activities at the schools were also cancelled. By giving a chance for students to meet others going through a similar experience, the *Dis/Connect* exhibition project aimed to support students during this time.

Theme and Format

When considering what theme would be appropriate for the exhibition, it became clear that it needed to address the pandemic, something everyone was going through. As the exhibition title suggests, students were invited to make a

work of art on issues of connection, isolation, and distance. It was hoped that by sharing individual experiences, students could help each other during this time of isolation, and perhaps find some positives such as how we can support one another in uncertain times. The *Dis/Connect* exhibition project was a chance for students to reflect and express feelings which are perhaps difficult to share in a classroom.

To encourage a diversity of artworks, students were invited to create a work (or a series of works) in any media. The final result was a collection of photographs, illustrations, graphic design, video, and manga. Another reason for not limiting works to one medium was to keep the project as inclusive as possible and avoid discouraging students who did not come from an art or design background. Along with their work, students were asked to submit a short introduction in English. In this way, they had two tasks: first, to interpret the theme artistically and second, to reflect on and articulate the ideas behind their work in English. This helped viewers to appreciate the art, as both text and image are displayed together online. More importantly, this also encouraged students to further articulate their ideas. First, teachers presented their own images with introduction texts as examples. These were discussed in the first Zoom meeting to provide scaffolding for students to write their own introductions which were edited and checked by the organizers via email and feedback was given.

It was decided that two hosting formats would be used: Tumblr, a free blog website, and Instagram, the social media app. Using two platforms made it more accessible to a wider audience. A benefit to using online platforms was that all media could be shared, not just two-dimensional works. Viewers could click and immediately see videos. Judging by the number of students who already had Instagram accounts at the time of the project, it appeared many students were familiar with the application. This allowed for further visibility as students often shared posts and tagged other users from the official project account.

Meeting and Exchanging Ideas

The exhibition was planned for the summer break. Exhausted from the disruption of the first semester, and following social distancing protocols, most universities had planned to limit summer activities to the bare minimum. It was a concern that students, already suffering from limited social interaction, may feel especially isolated with the ceasing of a regular academic schedule. We wanted to give interested students the opportunity to do something productive and creative, while encouraging as much social interaction as possible, under the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic.

The project consisted of two one-hour meetings and one opening reception, all held on Zoom. The first meeting, at the end of August, was a chance for students to introduce themselves, share their experiences of the pandemic, and listen to those of others. It was especially interesting to hear the voices of students from places we were seeing on the news such as Italy and Sweden, as well as different parts of Japan. The capabilities of the Zoom software, which had become clear during the spring semester, such as the breakout rooms and screen sharing functions, helped make the experience involving and interesting. Several art-related warm-up activities had been planned, but students were more keen to share their experiences with each other, and it seemed a shame to interrupt them. The time went by very quickly. The remainder of the meeting was used to explain the details of the project (such as deadlines and formats for submissions) and to answer any questions students had at this stage. Most participants were not art university students and so had limited experience in creating artworks; especially work to be shown in a public exhibition. For this reason we decided it was important to provide sufficient guidance and support for them to start their creative process with confidence and energy, while at the same time avoiding over-prescriptive instruction which might hamper their individual expression. We ended the meeting encouraged that students understood the requirements and were excited about working on their projects in the coming weeks.

The second meeting was held in mid-September and functioned as an interim discussion in which we could share our ideas and show what we had made so far. By this time, students had begun to formulate some ideas about the direction of their artworks. Some had already started experimenting with test works and were excited to share what they had created. It was crucial at this stage to relieve students of anxieties they had around what makes a good artwork, or how finished their artworks should be at this stage. We stressed the importance of the process over the finished piece and encouraged students to discuss their ideas, however unfinished, as a way of fleshing them out and thinking of possible new directions.

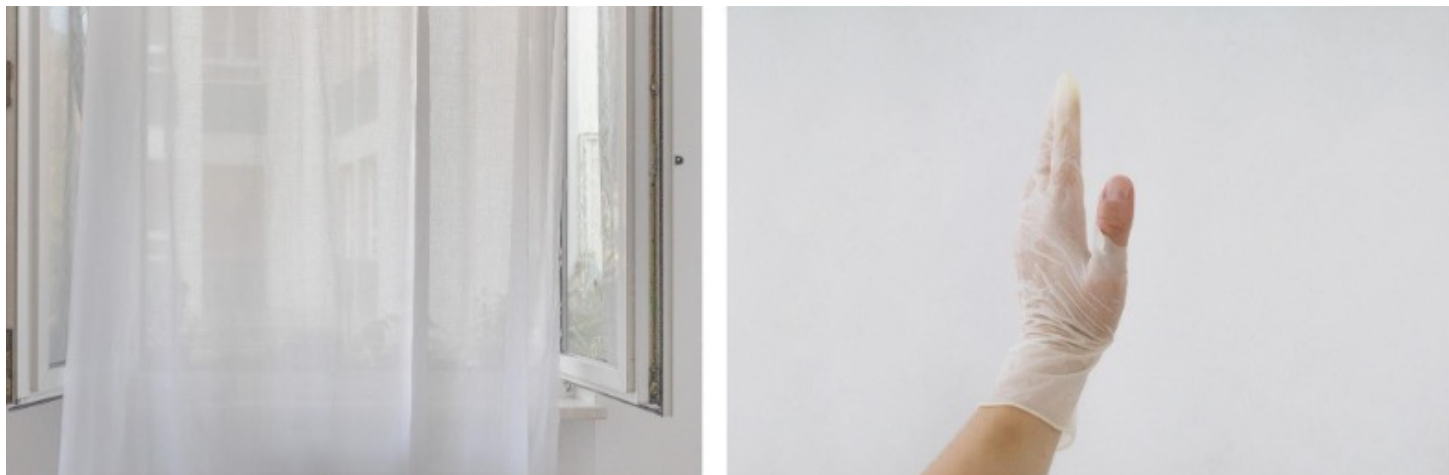
Once finished, the artworks were submitted to the organizers via Email along with the short English captions. They were then uploaded to the Tumblr and Instagram sites and launched before the online opening reception on September 28th. The event was a chance for participants to introduce their finished artworks and to see them hosted in the virtual public galleries. The presentations were followed by lively discussions as we were all excited to see the works on display and learn more about the creative processes of the artists. Translating creative decisions into words is no easy task, let alone in a second language. Yet, while this was a new and challenging experience for many, it helped to add depth to the artworks and a welcome element of closure to the project.

Student Works



Aya Fukunaga Family, 2020

This is my dis/connect image. By using this image, I showed “loneliness” and “connection”. The hand below is mine and the hand above is my grandfather's. He was in a nursing home because of dementia, so I could not meet him often. This image shows the situation when I held his hand and said good-bye after seeing him. Because of coronavirus, the chance of seeing him drastically decreased. This October, his condition suddenly changed and he passed away. So, this image became my treasure and also my family's treasure. At his funeral, I made a photo album by using this image and I displayed it at the back of the ceremony hall. If I did not join the dis/connect project, I don't think I could have had this kind of valuable experience. After joining this project, I thought that taking pictures is important not only in a happy situation but also a difficult situation because we can look back on the memories. So if I feel loneliness and sadness, I look back at this image.

Lucia Rose Buffa, Untitled, 2020

When COVID first hit Italy, there were some initial precautionary measures, but it wasn't long until the strict, stay-home order was issued. Suddenly, all these layers appeared, separating us from the World, as we'd previously known it. They arrived overnight, and now they're integrated into everyday life. There are physical layers—plastic gloves, Plexiglas, facemasks. Layers of distance - 2 meters from other people, a thousand kilometers from my family. Layers of uncertainty and unknown, for all of us. Quarantine in my city lasted 12 weeks. I spent a lot of time in my room (who didn't?). Spring arrived and I opened the windows to let it in; I watched the street through my sheer curtains. One day, in the supermarket, the plastic gloves I had to put on at the entrance caught on the handle of my shopping bag and the thumb snagged open. It felt symbolic.

Outcomes and Reflections

Since the launch, the exhibition has been introduced in two *PechaKucha Night* conferences in Tainan/Kyoto (December 2020) and London (January 2021), helping the artworks reach many more people than would be possible in a physical exhibition. The project was also presented at the CCLT6 conference in which three participating students from MIC were able to reflect on their experiences and show their artworks. The chance for students to talk publicly about their artistic process was very important. Not only did it help them to think deeper about their artworks and process what they had learned, but it also offered educators a direct insight into the outcomes of the project. This was a rare chance to hear directly from the students without teacher mediation.

One interesting take-away from the project that was mentioned by students was the novelty of taking part in a public exhibition. While some participants had prior experience of interpreting guidelines into creative artworks, for most it was their first time. Many commented on the challenge of trying to turn partially formed, perhaps not fully understood, feelings and emotions into something concrete and visual. As a mode of expression, art differs greatly from spoken or written language. One difference being that full explanations are, in fact, often redundant in art. Art welcomes nuance and suggestion, is forgiving of imprecision, and is the perfect vehicle for expressing what you struggle to with more direct forms of communication. Art can help us in the messy task of making sense of our inner world, even when it is not yet fully understood. It is this dialogue with ourselves that can lead to new realisations and discoveries, and help to process emotions in tough times. With all the uncertainties and anxieties of the pandemic, perhaps right now is the perfect time to introduce more creative expression activities into our students' lives.

2020 was a challenging year for students and teachers alike, and new teaching methods were adopted and discarded with rapid pace. On a positive note, being forced to experiment with new educational tools has led to some very creative outcomes, but it will take time for us to reflect upon and realise how successful our response to the crisis actually was. We feel that the virtual exhibition was one step towards helping students process their experience of a very difficult year. By encouraging them to reach-out, make connections, and share what they are going through, we hope that they could realise that they are not alone in these times and that their anxieties and worries are perfectly

normal. We were able to create this project thanks to the hard work and openness of the students and we now have a precedent in place that can be built on. Once we emerge from the pandemic, we hope we can encourage the same sense of creativity and optimism in future collaborative art exhibitions that transcend the physical boundaries of the classroom and create real bonds between students, regardless of how disconnected they may feel.

The Dis/Connect exhibition can currently be found at:

Tumblr: <https://miyazakikyoto.tumblr.com/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/dis.connect2020/>

References

Cohen, S. (2020, September 20). A digital pivot at Japan's universities: 'A lot of us expected to have our worst semesters online.' *The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2020/09/20/lifestyle/japanese-universities-online-coronavirus/>

Dis/Connect: A virtual art exhibition by students of Miyazaki International College and Kyoto University of the Arts [Virtual exhibition]. (2020-2021). <https://miyazakikyoto.tumblr.com>

dis.connect2020 [@dis.connect2020/]. (n.d.). Exhibition by students of Miyazaki International College and Kyoto University of the Arts. Dis/Connect (Distance, Contact, Isolation) [Virtual exhibition], Instagram. (2020-2021). Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.instagram.com/dis.connect2020/>

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (2020, September 11). *[COVID-19] Information about MEXT's measures* [Policy brief]. https://www.mext.go.jp/en/mext_00006.html

Okutsu, A. (2020, August 24). Lockdown generation: COVID-19 upends Asian students' plans. *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Lockdown-generation-COVID-19-upends-Asian-students-plans>