

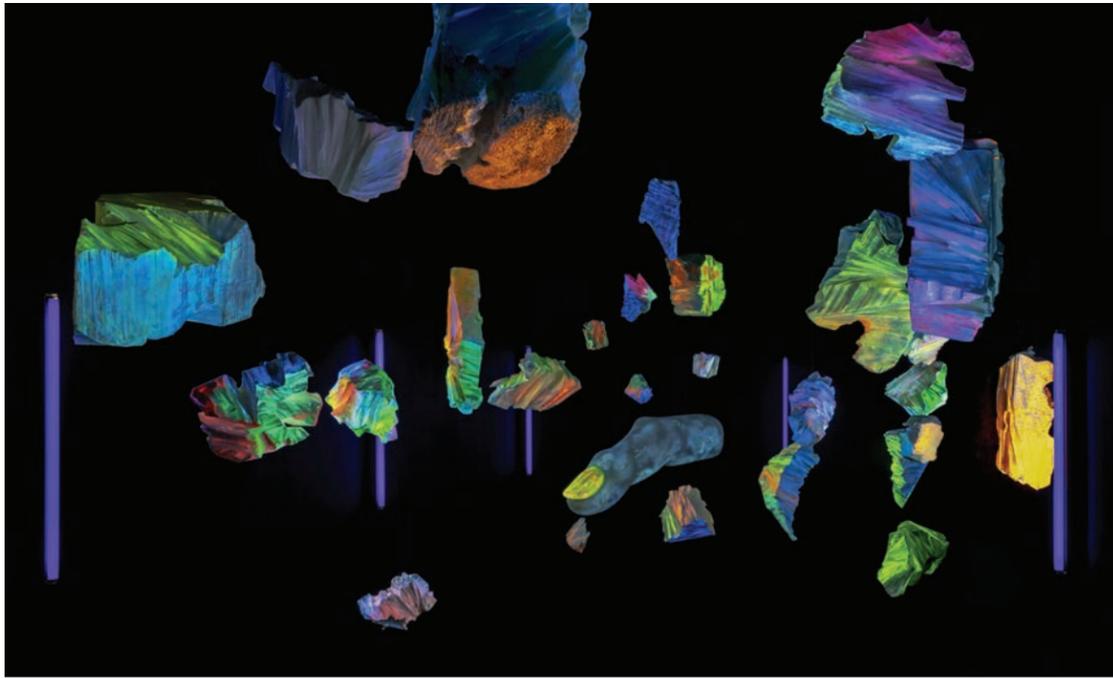
# Reconnecting community through writing and art

Jesse Cohoon  
with material from Laura Demers  
and Doug Grundman

The Toronto Writers Collective provides expressive writing workshops to those deprived of voice in our society. Writing with others in an atmosphere of dignity and respect, participants discover the value of their own stories.

After workshops were put on hiatus at over 30 locations in mid-March, the TWC pivoted to find new ways to connect with writers through virtual workshops. In only a few short weeks, this created ways to reach out to a diverse group of writers from Toronto, Mississauga, Ottawa and Montreal. Several regular workshops are now available Monday through Friday using Zoom.

Doug Grundman, Co-Executive Director of the TWC explained: "Confronted by the new reality of self-isolation, we faced a challenge. The irony was not lost - an organization that meets the needs of the vulnerable and intellectually isolated was given the opportunity to reach out to a larger, literally isolated, community. We realized we could leverage that platform to convene writers. Jesse Cohoon, Director of Programming, and Siobhan Lant, Outreach and Communications



Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa, *Asymmetries*, 2020. Installation view The Power Plant, Toronto, 2020. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

Manager, put together email lists of participants, facilitators and supporters and established a community database of over 600 individuals. Within the first week of government-encouraged self-isolation, we launched our first virtual workshop. Week two found us offering three public workshops as well as our first 'in-house' session with Dixon Hall, where I was broadcast into the centre, with writers seated and spaced safely throughout their meeting room. Through social media, we add new writers weekly."

Community groups, health

care and arts organizations are joining the grassroots growth. Several locations that previously held workshops on-site are now hosting virtual workshops for their members and clients. Other programming is being developed for a range of existing and new host organizations.

As art institutions continue to seek ways to engage their audiences during this time of isolation, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (Toronto) is excited to partner with the Toronto Writers Collective to offer a series of virtual writing

workshops. Facilitated by award-winning author Susan Ksiezopolski, the workshops will provide opportunities for both emerging and experienced writers to think about the connections between visual art and the written form. Using quotes and images of artworks as writing prompts, participants will gain insight into the artists' creative processes, and the contemporary issues with which they grapple in their work. Featured artists include Rashid Johnson, Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa, and Dawit L. Petros. The first four writing sessions,

which will take place online every two weeks during the months of May and June 2020, promise to bring community members together through the act of creating, and to generate uplift for those seeking to share their work with others.

Information is available at: <http://thepowerplant.org/ProgramsEvents/Programs/Other-Programs.aspx>

In times of crisis, opportunities appear. Travel, a significant financial and logistical issue for many, is no longer an obstacle to participation. Some feel safer within a format that offers them an opportunity to participate from their own homes.

The TWC is looking forward to returning to writing tables across the GTA, but this pandemic has compelled it to establish new ways to deliver programming that supports and encourages voice wherever there is a need.

For more information about the TWC and its workshops, contact: <http://torontowriterscollective.ca>.

Jesse Cohoon has been working with the TWC since 2015, currently as Director of Programming. His faux autobiography, *Out and Innuendo*, will be published posthumously in 2050 after most of the main characters are either dead or forgotten.

## Preparedness now a term floated daily

Roth from p1

Vaccines are forecast late into the year at the earliest, which seems like decades away as time moves slowly. But prolonged shortages in supplies of key medical products to fight the health crisis demonstrate the opposite. If frontline medical workers are presently fending for personal protection equipment and pharmacies are forced to reduce prescriptions or cancel them for lack of supply, that makes clear that we must prepare for major adjustments over an extended period of time.

The state of the economy is the greatest long-term concern. With lay-offs in vital service industries already hitting record numbers, the restart will be slow and arduous. The hotel/travel/hospitality and retail sectors were instantly affected. Successful employment in other branches of the labour market will be substantially more difficult to retain or attain.

The federal government's response has come efficiently, quickly and without great bureaucratic hurdles. Yet monies do not grow on trees as the saying goes and come at a cost, if not today, guaranteed by

tomorrow. Future federal deficits will spawn increased existing or new taxes.

Preparedness is a term floating in daily vocabulary more frequently than in recent years. That in itself is not bad, and it perhaps will lead to a bit of a paradigm shift in how we live, envision and execute future plans.

The uninterrupted abundance of our truly privileged lives in the northern hemisphere has come to a sudden unplanned stoppage. The disruption will become less of an inconvenience as we are called to muster up to new challenges. Those who have travelled extensively in sub-Saharan Africa know that we have enjoyed more of everything than any other generation in human history. The personal and civic sacrifices that will be asked of us are much smaller than the majority of the world's population makes daily without grunting and heaving.

The world as a whole is gravely affected. This global village is and has become intrinsically more interdependent. Perhaps we are involuntarily forced to look long and hard into the mirror and to realize that community lives next door to us. Our neighbors become

the extended arm, when family lives out of town or even in another province.

The need for help will steadily grow in one way or another; helping hands are never rejected by the ones - who truly need and depend on them. You are invited to extend yours, if and when you are in the position to do that. You will not regret it. The rewards of giving often outlast the receiving of gifts to us.

We never know when the call for assistance can become a

matter of life and death in these trying times. It is good to know that we can actively count on each other. As the Swedish proverb says, "Shared joy is double the joy; shared sorrow is half the sorrow." Community living is an action word.



Phil E. Roth, columnist