

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

# COVID-19, ART AND LUXURY

FROM DIGITALIZATION TO ANALOGIZATION  
IN COVID-19 TIMES



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*We want to thank the 24 bachelor students who joined the first SSE Art Initiative course Art and Luxury, which was delivered entirely on Zoom in COVID-19 spring of 2020. With aesthetic creativity and enthusiasm, they not only redefined new luxury. Together we also realized the need for art-ful analogization in digitalized worlds and the desire for Zone!*

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## ZONE

Today, it's June 17, 2020. Almost three months ago, a coronavirus, soon known as COVID-19, crashed into our lives as well as into the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE). In March 2020, the SSE Art Initiative, which curates permanent and temporary shows of contemporary art and stages art and literary talks, was about to launch a super analogue course on art in business. Everything was set, offering Bachelor students a grand educational highpoint full of analogue experiences. We were welcomed by the art best museums, Moderna Museet, Bonniers Konsthall and Sven Harry's, by cool art galleries such as Hillström, Andersson and Futura, and even invited into the studios of top artists Jens Fänge, Mikael Olsson and Goldin+Senneby. Swedish businesses like Rodebjer, Acne, SEB and CF Hill had been contacted by alumna and by course advisor Michael Storåkers. A complete bachelor course, wholly devoted to Art in Business, was ready to launch for the first time ever at SSE.

Long before COVID-19, we longed to cast open the gates to aesthetic experiences for SSE students. We yearned to go from the mostly extra-curricular exposure to art to course teaching and learning, inviting all to enjoy – das Ding an sich – the real stuff of art! We designed a course like an adventure to somewhere else. Faculty and their guests wanted to guide students into a new exciting Zone, allowing them to experience physical, material and sensual realities. Inspired by Wittgensteinian US philosopher Susanne Langer's "Philosophy in a new Key", we believed in arranging encounters and *presentations*, which were to be subsequently reflected upon in *discursive forms*. SSE Art Initiative's pedagogical motto was "Where to start? Start with art!"! Wow!

## ZOOM DIGITALIZATION

And then bang; Zones shifted to Zoom! To deliver the course digitally was a challenge, especially given our tacit assumption that Art = Analogue. Contrary to many established opinions, we nevertheless decided to run our course not in Zones but on Zoom.

At first, all analogue aspirations seemed to be going down the drain because of COVID-19. Instead of bringing students to new Zones, we paradoxically found ourselves facing students on digital Zoom screens. This crazy situation could not, as whining professors often do, be blamed on some "rationalization" of education. No evil, greedy university administrator mandated the use of Zoom as a way of increasing teaching-loads of poor proletarianized teachers. This was different! A virus, not an ugly mass-university manager, forced us out of the Zone and onto the Zoom web!

After contacting those we had planned to visit physically, we found none of the artists, otherwise fierce defenders of direct, immediate and analogue presence, actually refused to be on Zoom. We were all mobilized in the war against the virus. We refused to give up and back out of our obligation to students. Our last Zone, in this case our classroom, was also physically closed. But Zoom connected us all in the virtual classroom where students from all over the world (for most foreign students had returned home) gathered for long, intense hours. In a strange way, Zoom seemed to co-exist with an analogue Zone! Was this "blended learning"? Was this because we never translated analogue to digital? Might we, in hindsight, be experiencing something very different from so called *Digitalization*. In an economy where most firms are born and groomed into digital worlds, our course seems to be about a very different phenomenon. Let us call it *Analogization*! On our digital Zoom platform, we were exploring how to save and secure an analogue Zone.

Our Zoom experience might thus evoke a new area of management research, highly relevant for firms emerging out of e-commerce. Thanks to our ingenious SSE students, we found ourselves reflecting on how a digital enterprise, which was maneuvering in the virtual, might conjure analogue reality where a real shop "curates" real things for real people in a real city. Such shops are no longer selling-points anxious to make deals. They are showrooms that are more like a gallery or an art museum. The feeling we wanted to create was you have seen it on Zoom! But you long to go to the Zone in person! To travel to Paris after the

COVID-19 quarantine, to walk into the Louvre for an analogue date with Mona Lisa. You have seen her innumerable digital times. Now that you want the real thing “das Ding an sich” you might even consider spending more than the 7.5 seconds an average museum goer stops for the Lady. When analogization works, you will enjoy the experience much more than digitally posting a picture on Instagram and Facebook. So how did Zoom and Zone merge and put students of Art in Business on a new experience track? Our SSE Art Initiative Zoom course is discussed below.

### **ZONE ANALOGIZATION**

Luxury brands and luxury industries are explicitly preoccupied with understanding the interaction of art and management and that was why we called the course “Art and Luxury”. But a slightly hidden agenda was of course to invite students to reflect on how art might impact businesses as capitalism expands in non-industrial sectors. So how did students tackle the course’s theme in their assignments? Of the 32 students originally enrolled for the Zone course, 24 remained when Zoom appeared. Students *first* completed a special *free assignment* presented on Zoom, and *secondly* they handed in a *written exam*.

Students, some individually and others in groups of up to three people, presented a total of fourteen 20-minute assignments on Zoom in mid-May 2020. They were asked to provide a pitch that promoted more business engagement in art. The pitch should address a specific, real or imagined, company. The coronavirus situation of course impacted the assignments. We had discussed the digital/analogue luxury-dilemmas and the assignments often focused on the minute and immediate, almost intimate, experience versus traditional management matched with an environment of mediatic mass marketing. Two assignments were about adding intimacy and physicality in the music industry. It was suggested that “luxury” in this business could be traced back to “having direct connection to the artist” (the case of musician Ryan Leslie illustrated that idea) and “enjoying a unique trace” (the rediscovery or retro-direct-to-disc recording technique) of live music performed in a private house in COVID-19 fashion.

These presentations were influenced by performance art by Yoko Ono and Marina Abramovic. From such concrete live cases, students Ahmed Kaid and Albin Berggren developed new reflections on experiments of new luxury. Recycling of unsold garment stock into artist materials was pitched by Axel Dillner to H&M. Bringing fine dining top chefs to private homes was explored by Anton and Artur Giwereman and Henrik Nyström, and from Canada, Chloe O’Brien introduced us to Fogo Island’s luxury venue offering the luxury of very local nature- and food-experiences to select guests. Chloe emphasized Fogo’s art inspiration from both Japanese design avant-garde Mingei (1920-30) as well as the Italian movement of Arte Povera. Chloe has defined artful luxury as “elevating the everyday” in the vein of art philosopher Arthur Danto who interprets aesthetics as a “transfiguration of the commonplace”.

Azma Mohammed took the premium brand Estee Lauder and focused on one specific product: the lipstick. Her take on this brought us all on a micro-excursion into an intimate lipstick experience in COVID-19 times. Can a premium brand, viewed through the sign of art, turn into luxury? Hannah Halbheer gave us a digital roundtrip to recent virtual art-spaces introduced on the web by galleries and museums under COVID-19 times. How do you maintain the analogue in the virtual? Michelle Wang and Matthias Eyford showed us how Dior’s first female creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri strengthens the ties between Art Basel and Miami by inviting artists to make statements about female empowerment by both “dressing up” and “down”. Lina Laroussi, Clarisse Marion and Paul Guguen discover how a new bra brand LOLO founded by two female French engineers, Ocean Briere and Melissa Zitouni, might develop luxury strategies with upcoming young artists, such as Gab Bois and cartoonist Digilee, as well as by paying homage to a star, Niki de St Phalle.

Francois Gautier challenged Accor Hotels to find inspiration in the work of Yves St Laurent. By introducing how St Laurent put paintings by pop art, Mondrian or Picasso in motion on the catwalk, Francois hopes to seduce Accor to try the art track to luxury. Johanna Hansson-Dahl, Karoline Johnsen and Martin Johnson made a convincing

pitch to famous department store Selfridges, recalling its grand art-connected history and suggesting a performance experience of midnight luxury shopping tours offered to small groups meeting the COVID-19 regulations. From Anya Srisakultiew, Nathasit Amnuyepornsakul and Tarinee Pawakaranond we got, directly from Thailand, a case of how the complex craft of silk, closely connected to Thai royal traditions, could be modernized into contemporary luxury by connecting it to the Mitr Thai fashion brand. Students Natalie Wild and Oscar Hegelund presented pitches connected to Ferrari, and Ksenia Rundin pitched Elon Musk to develop a cultural strategy turning hi-tech focused Tesla into a more humanistic art-based brand.

Through these inventive Zoom presentations (also Zoom-recorded for our SSE Art Initiative archives), we actually experienced how digital media can evoke analogue ideas. Students creatively experimented in shaping aesthetic atmospheres. Some presentations contained sampled media-materials already integrated in luxury brand communications. But this celebratory tendency, tainted by conformist respectfulness for established luxury, mostly gave way to students' own experiments in art-related strategies. Here one spots traces of Dada, Surrealism, Situationism and other avant-gardes movements mentioned in the course. By challenging "old bling-bling" with "new luxury", art helped to escape luxury-conformism by reshaping aesthetic creations.

The idea of a "new" luxury brings us beyond industrial leftovers from the old world of craft and of elites that are preserved in museums of a feudal, royal or aristocratic past. To judge from our students' assignments, new luxury evolves in new directions influenced by both art and artists. Our expert guests Cay Bond, Michael Storåkers, Helena Borgblad, Jan Åman, Isak Nilson, Jessica Backsell, Roberto Verganti, John Peter Nilsson, Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Daniel Birnbaum as well as artists Jens Fänge, Michael Olsson, Simon Goldin and Jacob Senneby, all helped us move in new directions. All in all, it seems that one overarching theme discovered in COVID-19 times might be: analogization.

## ZOOMING ZONES

*To me, art today is a way of getting out of the mind's indoctrinated patterns. Forgetting the narrow-minded content fed us by social media, derived from complex technologies' algorithms only feeding us with content that meets the prevailing worldview. What we will dream of in the future is not luxurious lifestyle. Not the sense of belonging to the socialite! It is the freedom of thought and peace of mind! Art can guide luxury in this new direction!*

Student Natalie Wild's words are somewhat supported by her assignment-comrades statement:

*While not resting on either use or exchange value it seems plausible that the third source of financial value lies in aesthetics... Because the modern world is polluted by words and blurred images, the art-based luxury brands act as "facilitators" for that third source?*

As Natalie says, most students rapidly refocused on luxury not as an arrogant, unethical practice but at a possible eye-opener for something in business. And this eye-opener might be art. Focusing on art in business unveils hidden tensions of which one of the students mentions one:

*It seems obvious that the luxury object is a real object of desire that unleashes passions and that can prove to be perverse, going so far as to create a cult. ... Should the art and luxury industry take advantage of this at the risk of dismissing ethics?*

As noted early on in the course, and supported by long introductions to aesthetics, aesthetics always begs the question of ethics. This question is also at the heart of debates on luxury but it seems that connecting this discussion to art opens a more elaborate discourse. Discussions on luxury suddenly then become informed by aesthetics rather

than moral dogma. Paul Gugen hints at what this might imply:

*Philosophy reduced to matters of conceptual cognition or representations is no longer worthy the name "philosophy". Thus, art can be defined as the proper instrument in an aesthetic method of metaphysics.*

How often do courses in management open up to discussions about metaphysics? Economics might lead to studies of utilitarianism and pragmatism, and there it stops! But considering so-called luxury products as art in the light of aesthetics to Paul evokes other aspects in our encounter with economy:

*Of course; feelings are subjective but they have a value beyond one's own experience. Also, Kant writes that subjective feeling is a gateway that could lead to objective truth, and thus guide us towards objectivity and knowledge...*

The mere idea that consumption hinges on subjective feelings seems banal. But is this feeling just a sign of a more objective "truth" that renders value to art and quasi-art objects? This reflection can be pushed bit further:

*Surely aesthetics is in some sense ineffable and unique which leads to subjectivity in interpretation, but the very fact that all humans take an aesthetic perspective on certain things, like luxury, leads to harmony among viewpoints, imbuing a degree of objectivity that gives luxury mass appeal.*

If it was not for tossing in concrete examples from contemporary art, such ideas would lack discursive dynamics. When attempting to grasp the strange and for students of management and economics totally uncharted terrain of luxury and business, artwork comes in handy.

Albin Berggren adds to the debate by connecting to specific art works:

*One fundamental similarity between art and luxury; they are both multisensory. Hermann Nitsch and the Vienna Activists were longing for sensual ecstasy in art. Their definite goal was the existential feast of being. The same phenomenon might drive a consumer of a luxury brand.*

If we look upon demand-driven business and marketing, focused management familiarity with art shows that this hardly guarantees global success and fame in the art world. Recalling how artists managed in ways luxury seems to operate:

*The aim is not to adapt to demand. Christo, Warhol, Hirst never fitted the market and did not pander to customers' wishes... this makes them totally aligned with the "anti-laws" of marketing of a luxury strategy.*

But what is art? What is luxury? Such questions do not belong to the register of the Zone, something Natalie Wild puts as:

*Luxury sets its own standards and does not need to define itself. It never fears "undifferentiation". That something is neat, pleasing or cool is not a prerequisite for our understanding it as "meaningful". Such clarity only applies to mass produced brands.*

But suppose art and artist excel in shaping a Zone, how do they operate? Are they art managers or designers with skills we could identify? After meeting with artists on Zoom one student for instance attempts to understand what they really do:

*Two different things are intertwined, first, art made for the public by the artist in her studio and, secondly, art as commerce and*

*marketing event. It is never clear-cut as either art or management. Everything seems to be about balancing the factors, which both luxury and art creators have to manage. But his or her drive is passion, not perfect professionalism or search for money.*

Nevertheless, art is also about business and this is blatantly clear in many artist careers and strategies presented during the course. One participant in the course brings up the masterclasses conveyed by meeting two icons of art and business.

*The reference to Joseph Beuys “Art=Capital” and Andy Warhol’s “Business Art” informs a view on art as a valuable resource, or “capital”, which can elevate people through playfulness and imagination...*

And whatever goes on in the Zone takes much attention and sensitivity. Some days after we learnt of Christo Javacheff’s death, Axel Dillner pays homage to the Zone virtuoso:

*The success of exhibiting the artwork is thus art in itself. The art of the extreme delicacy in managing, organizing and curating projects such as the veiling of the Reichstag in Berlin or the Pont Neuf in Paris will now forever be missed in the artworld with Christo’s Sunday demise.*

But is this Zone evocation a question of genius? Is it a matter of convincing an audience by messages or communication? No, says Paul Guguen adamantly:

*To see art today as the act of a lonely genius is as unsatisfactory as it would be to explain technical development by the invention only... artists do not try to be persuasive about their productions by using words and concepts. That is entirely the work of critics.*

So, what can we say about this Zone? Thanks to its magic “share screen” button, the Zoom course allowed us to visit both Christo’s installation “The Gates” in Central Park (2005) and Louis Vuitton’s pop-up show in Beverly Hills (2019) featuring artist collaborations of the luxury brand. Albin reflects:

*The Christos never sold any of the steel and fabric of the Gates. They did not have to as the market for merchandise and preparatory work prospered. More important however, selling The Gates would be to destroy the dream. This resembles the Louis Vuitton pop up exhibit on Rodeo Drive summer 2019. The items displayed in Beverly Hills were not for sale, because the act of purchase might destroy the dream.*

#### **COVID-19 CONDITIONED LESSONS FOR ART IN BUSINESS**

A devastating pandemic scrambled our plans and we found ourselves on computers and screen managed experiences of art, performance and installations. We had been talking about the analogue from our digital prison. We have evoked aesthetic experience without making it. Or perhaps we did experience something central and common after all, a longing, desire and dream of experiences central to the topic we studied: aesthetics. We longed for it more than a boy might long for a red Ferrari, a girl for a Kelly-bag, a lady for a Bouchardon diadem or a gentleman for a wooden case of ice-cold Dom Perignon champagne. We explored new luxury through art and found ourselves on Zoom in an exciting Zone of art. Our SSE students provided us with much food for future thought. For the time being one of our helpful brilliant students, summarizes much better what this COVID-19 Zoom gave:

*After studying economics and management for three years, I got stuck in a very cemented way of thinking and approaching things – a rigid methodology if you will. I cherish this “new world”*

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