California’s Varied Social Responses to the Pandemic

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Our Mission

The mission of this project is to create an artistic representation of how the current pandemic is affecting the physical space that surrounds our hometowns of Huntington Beach and San Francisco.
Through quotations by prominent figures, our own personal analysis of broader themes, the introduction of certain California issues surrounding Covid-19, and an added artistic representation placed upon relevant photographs, we will dive into how the population of California has reacted to the pandemic, and how the change in daily routine has altered spaces, values, and priorities. Through reflecting on scholars of the past, we bring their ideas to light in order to emphasize themes seen throughout the life of the pandemic in 2020.
Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag.  

“Photographs are a means of making ‘real’ matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.”

Sontag highlights the idea that, in times of social stress and controversy, photographs are the ultimate visual tool in bringing attention to subjects that cannot be ignored. In a time when we are consumed by media and information overload, bypassing real news seems easy but with the implementation of photographs, one’s ability to ignore a problem becomes harder. Humans are visual creatures and through the photos collected from California, it can be seen that the influence of photos and art has created a greater social flux.
The Questions We Want to Answer

How has the introduction of the virus changed California’s prioritization of social issues?

How does manipulating photos emphasize the stark new reality that public spaces are now a danger?

Why does a group of individuals in Orange County think of the lockdown as a suppression of rights, rather than a suggestion for safety and public health?

Why are the homeless in San Francisco, two months into the pandemic, still not a city-wide priority in order for public safety in terms of public health?
The Social Body

“Nature, society, and culture speak simultaneously. The individual body should be seen as the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths and social contradictions are played out, as well as the locus of personal and social resistance, creativity, and struggle”

Schepel-Hughes and Lock

As these scholars suggest, nature + society + culture makes up what it truly means to have a social body and these aspects are crucial to understanding how society shifts in times of stress. It is essential that the human body is taken into consideration not only in its state of physical health throughout the pandemic, but also the understanding that the change in social life of humans is the quintessential element that differentiates the pandemic from any worldwide occurrence.
The “social body” we are defining is the dynamic group of individuals that makeup the population of the world and by specifically focusing on certain social bodies within individual cities, the effect of the pandemic can be understood as diverse and complex. In order to grasp the effect that the shutdown the pandemic has caused throughout the world, the social body is arguably the most important feature of this disruption. The human body controls the social world. The relationship between the human body’s social world and the environment encapsulates the very notion we see today: this relationship is dependent of the other. The social world controls the environment and vice versa.
The Social Body

To the left is the Long Beach Gymnasium and to the right is the Stanford University Campus. Both areas of high foot traffic and typically bustling footpaths, yet are seen empty and vacant. The social body has been recommended to stay clear of public spaces like these. The social world is pushed from their environment, and pushed from what consumes a daily routine. Places of social community simply are no longer social.
Artistic representation meaning.

The representation of these areas in California represent the pressure to perform even in a time when these spaces are unoccupied and the social body is told to stay safe indoors. The arrows above highlight the actions still being taken to exercise and study by the members of their respective communities, even if the physical space is empty. The footpaths typically occupied are now void of human steps, but the intention of each environment is still alive, it is simply displaced to the comfort of one's home.
“imagining the social world as a body makes it possible to reimagine the relationships between the human body and the social world.” – Jodie Clark

In the case of Covid-19, what is considered dangerous in addition to the virus itself, is the transformation of the social world due to the changing relationship the social world has with the outdoor environment. The idealistic thought of beaches and national parks have been transformed by the virus, and the social body has turned to isolation for safety. This has meant that the natural and environmental course of these areas have resumed and are found free of the human body.
"The statewide stay at home order has an unexpected benefit: fewer traffic jams and less air pollution. That's good news for Californians with health problems."

Julie Cart, CalMatters News

"Shutdowns from coronavirus create blue skies in California, could inform future pollution control"

Chelsea Gohd, Space.com
Huntington Beach is known for its long beaches and for having a very dynamic social body that typically loves to enjoy the outdoor environment of the beach. It is seen through these snapshots of the most popular beaches in Orange County, that through respecting the CDC's social distancing guidelines, the social body no longer occupies the space of the beach. The spaces typically frequented are found empty, giving space for the community of nature to bloom and flourish without human interference.
Public Space and the Social Body. Artistic Representation.

San Francisco's parks and streets are free of traffic, giving way for open space to thrive. Wildlife is able to take over areas they hadn't before, and the drawings exemplify the feeling that even though there may be stress in the air within the city metaphorically due to the virus, the physical spaces are given a chance to take a breath. Free of footpath and air pollution.
The Plagued City

reconceptualizing the notion of power.

“not the collective festival but strict divisions; not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complex hierarchy that assumed the capillary functioning of power...”

Michel Foucault

The idea of the 'Plagued City' has consumed much of Michel Foucault's thought of how power plays a role in society in terms of governing a people. In 2020, the age of Covid-19, governing a people has been very complex. Many ideals surrounding freedom and action have been sacrificed for safety, and with this has come acceptance with some but also resistance within others. The recommendation to stay home and shelter in place throughout California has caused economic stress to many individuals, and some have been driven to action that some may argue to be quite detrimental to the containment of the virus.
Huntington Beach Covid-19 Protest

"The relation of each individual to his disease and to his death passes through the representatives of power, the registration they make of it, they decision they take on it”  
Michel Foucault

“More than 500 protesters converged on Huntington Beach again Friday to demand stay-at-home rules in California be lifted and to express their displeasure with Gov. Gavin Newsom’s directive closing local beaches to slow the spread of coronavirus.”

By ANDREW J. CAMPA, HANNAH FRY, LUKE MONEY, LA Times
The change in the way we live our daily lives has raised deep questions about the way in which people perceive information from their government as people start to question the idea of freedom and re-evaluate their own definition of what they understand to be the social body. The political unrest of Huntington Beach is worsening the risk of infection, and the desire for protest by certain individuals during a time where peace and shelter are essential, raises the opinion that there is a fine line between the government’s suggestions for protection and the stripping of one’s rights to live freely. Though it may seem straightforward to think about the ethical dilemma of exposing people to the virus, some in Huntington and beyond feel that their rights as Americans are being taken away. In a way, one could say that it is unreasonable to hold protests in a time where social gatherings are highly discouraged, yet the action taken by the individuals who feel targeted by the safety suggestions, raises an important question: where will our economy go from here, and when will people start to risk their life in order to lead their ‘normal’ life.
These two photos are of the same pier in Huntington Beach. To the left the protest is being held in full force whereas to the right, the expected social isolation is overwhelming. These graphics raise the question of the ethical dilemma between safety and freedom addressed by certain individuals concerned with their right to act freely. Yet, where is the line drawn between freedom and danger?
The art placed onto these contrasting photos represent the varying amount of stress and danger present in either environment. By focusing on how the emptiness of how the pier typically resides during the pandemic, the action and lack of precaution seen during the protest can easily be understood in the agitated energy the lined arrows suggest. By adding unnecessary psychological and physical stress on the human body and environment, the image of the protest feels overwhelming while on the right, the pier is found in peace, in safety yet still the glooming stress of the threat of the virus remains overhead.
Rudolf Virchow, a German physician/scientist/politician, argued that disease was never only a question of biology, but that it was most often socially derived or spread which is how it actually becomes dangerous. Social medicine brings into question the difference in treatment between the rich and the poor. The notion that disease can spread at any rate through a population has been a major concern in terms of Covid-19. This virus has made its way from family to family, town to town, country to country, and is now all over the world in varying concentrations. Virchow’s analysis that disease is spread socially could not be more true for the case of the current pandemic. Social events have been deemed dangerous across the entire world due to the massive vulnerability that people are subject to in social interactions. In the case of San Francisco, the vulnerability aspect of Covid-19 has proven to be an immense problem within the homeless community. There are over 8,000 homeless people in San Francisco, and during this time of immense public health vulnerability, the political officials in charge of allocating resources have faced major ethical struggles.
Social Medicine. *Homelessness in San Francisco*

“It is the curse of humanity that it learns to tolerate even the most horrible situations by habituation.” Rudolf Virchow

The homeless population has often been overlooked by the remaining population of San Francisco. People simply tolerate the presence of those who cannot find shelter, and in a time when shelter is essential to the containment of the virus, the call to action in regards to the homeless problem in San Francisco has been made a priority. Despite the fact that so many resources have been allocated to housing the homeless and attempts to control the shelter crisis during the Covid-19 outbreak, there seems to never been enough been done to truly solve the problem.

“Homelessness is incompatible with health.”

London Breed, Mayor of San Francisco
“It’s nearly impossible for homeless people to maintain social distance. Their needs are met en masse. The CDC recommends 110 square feet per person for people housed together during the outbreak. Most homeless shelters simply don’t have that kind of space. “There has always been an increased risk of communicable diseases like tuberculosis, hepatitis A, and influenza,” Kushel says. Covid-19 is just the newest addition to the list.”

London Breed, Mayor of San Francisco
Homeless in San Francisco. Artistic representation meaning.

The artistic additions made to this photo are similar to those seen in the depictions of the protests occurring in Huntington Beach. The chaotic energy of these designs are essential to the idea that the inability to stay safe due to lack of space for the homeless is creating mass stress among the homeless community. Not only are these stresses placed on those living in the street, but also places a burden on the surrounding community.
Susan Sontag emphasized the importance of photography has on the culture of society. Photography taken and used by journalists is aimed at creating an effect on the reader that is like no other. The reader loses the ability they once had to ignore the tragedies of the world. They are no longer able to dismiss issues they may have never had to struggle with.

“PHOTOGRAPHS OBJECTIFY: they tune an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality”

Susan Sontag
Our use of photos in this project helps our audience gain an up close account of what is taking place in our hometowns in response to COVID-19 precautions. Taking into account Sontag’s ideas surrounding the impact of photos, we create an opportunity to apply what we have learned from this course to our personal experience within the pandemic. California, like every part of the world, is experiencing a variety of social responses and unexpected transformations to the measures being taken by the state to contain the spread of Covid-19. The impact of these changes can be seen by the sharp lined designs, pointed towards the source of the stress. By re-emphasizing the overwhelming influence of power by political figures, understanding the changes in the social body, and internalizing the true effects of the virus in vulnerable communities, we aim to create a more encompassing recollection of the issues facing California during a time of recommended social isolation.


