Sonka Hecker: Am I still me? When there are no words, I paint, when there are, I write.

Covid 19: good for writers: more time to write, bad for writers with children: less time to write. Good for writers: people have more time to read, bad for writers: people have less money to buy books, bookshops are closed anyway. Good for writers: something interesting to write about, bad for writers: nobody likes to read more bad news. Good for writers: they have a purpose, they can help people to cope with the situation, to sort out their thoughts, bad for writers who can’t cope themselves.

Wuhan was just a city in China, when we first heard its name in the news in January 2020. We didn’t know that the Corona virus was going to cross oceans and frontiers. We didn’t know how fast it would travel. In March it was called a pandemic and still we thought: Not us. So far dramatic news always had always been distant: earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, hunger… One might even say: the more dramatic - the more distant our mind wants and therefore imagines them to be. We never believed WE would become the news.

Then the virus touched down in Europe, Italy. Suddenly we were not sure it wouldn’t come over the Alps like Hannibal’s elephants. We saw chaos in Italian hospitals, lorries with dead people, tears, many tears. Corona was a new word, pandemic was the next new word, the third word was lock-down and suddenly everybody was shopping. In Italy there were no more noodles on the shelves, in Germany no more toilet paper. They said the French bought condoms. Stereotype or romantic prejudice?

In the end of February I spent a weekend teaching a workshop in painting and Yoga, when I realized that the pictures were somehow strange. Four women painted volcanoes, although
Berlin obviously isn’t Japan or Sicily. I painted an elderly couple with their dog sitting on a park bench facing a vanishing Manhattan and a huge Madonna-like woman protecting people leaving in a boat. I felt uncomfortable with the outcome of my doings. What was approaching us? I didn’t know then that it would be my last workshop in 2020, all others having to be cancelled because of lockdowns or complicated hygiene concepts. Nobody wanted to imagine meeting and painting with masks on and open windows in September. Looking back from now, the obstacles we were facing then were laughable. We had to wash our hands, nothing more.

We exhibited our paintings in the entrance hall of a sports and rehabilitation center. My friend and her husband mounted them on the walls, unaided because only one ‘household’ was allowed present, but the paintings hardly ever saw their audience, talked to empty rooms until June. No vernissage, no finissage. What happens when you leave volcanos alone in a room? Were they alone? Maybe they emitted their warning information into the air and the air went into the lung of an employee and was taken out into the city? Some museums filmed their empty rooms with penguins walking through the exhibition. There were cartoons of Mona Lisa feeling alone and depressed in the Louvre, monkeys in the zoo wondering where their entertaining visitors were. I started screenshotting the pictures with the feeling of being a reporter or field-worker, collecting them to tell people born in 2020 all about these incredible times.

March brought new headlines, same subject: Corona. There was me as a professional: a writer, painter and teacher, but suddenly my other social roles celebrated a huge comeback: I became purely a nourisher: a full-time mother of four quite grown-up children and their partners, a daughter of an old father, not being able to shop or cook, a grandmother of one grandchild, having been born in the beginning of February (first of the so called “born-in-lock-down-babies”) .... and mistress or housekeeper of the dog, the cat and the rabbit, all needing food on a daily basis. What was my responsibility?

The fourth new word threatened me most: triage! French doctors had to decide which patient would get the free bed in hospital and it was the one with the highest chances to survive. They didn’t take over 80-year-olds anymore. I asked my brother, a doctor, whether we shouldn’t ‘t buy a small oxygen machine, because our father was 87 years old and might not be allowed to be treated in hospital. Was this real?
I confess that I belonged to the people that bought carloads of food. I had a backache from all the carrying. I stored a lot at my fathers, even though he wasn’t able to cook. He orders tuna pizza every day, but who would know if the pizza supply would break down? I bought even more for my own family; they eat like a locust plague. Secretly, in the dark, I carried the bags down the stairs into the cellar so that the neighbors wouldn’t see. I became a top-secret shopaholic hamster! The voices said: buy, buy, buy, you are responsible for your family and at the same time: Hamsters are bad for society! Stop hamstering! I suffered from a bad conscience. Of course, I knew, that piling up groceries was fuelling the panic. I became a criminal simply because I was terrified of an empty fridge. I did not want to send friends into the supermarket to buy food for us when being in quarantine.

But I did not only store food to feel safer, I stored information as well. The more I knew the safer I felt. Newsoholic hamster! Our Corona Virus was a virus called Covid 19, but the Corona family, being named so because they looked like they wore a crown, was known since 1966 in humans and animals. They can’t exist without us. They need us to live and multiply. We are their hosts! But they don’t behave like guests! They are just brain, just programs on their way to the next computer. Where is my virus protection program? I watched You tube videos on what to buy for catastrophes and I bought oat flakes, milk, toilet paper, raisins, dates, chocolate, noodles, rice, biscuits, flour, tinned vegetables, baby food, dog food, cat food, rabbit food, even a camping gas cooker, a radio and water in case we ran out of electricity. That wasn’t me anymore! When I put cheese and butter in the freezer, my family laughed, thought I was crazy but—who could I trust? The reason for my behaviour was motivated by the gut feeling that suddenly I couldn’t rely on the mass media in Germany anymore. Whether they would report a shortage was questionable. Wouldn’t they rather keep silent not to initiate a mass panic? The men of my household did not care, because it was me who had always been responsible for a full fridge. Survival was a question of gender and role models, not of fitness.

Were my life-in-wartime-genes of my grandmothers activated? The shelves in the supermarkets emptied quickly and slowly my family thought that maybe I was right. My daughter bought nappies for months and went with her boyfriend and baby to our house in the country. They started to write 100 wedding invitations for August, believing everything would be okay by then.
The biggest shock was the **lockdown**. People had to stay home unless they had to go shopping, to the doctor or walk the dog. The schools and universities closed down. Germany is ruled locally. Each of the sixteen “Bundesländer” looked at how many hospital beds it had, then took their own decisions on travel bans. Suddenly there were frontiers inside Germany no one was allowed to cross. Berliners were allowed to travel into Brandenburg, but not into Mecklenburg. With hammering hearts, we packed our car with rabbit, cat and dog and escaped in the night to our house in the Mecklenburg countryside, avoiding the motorway like thieves or bank-robbers. We were six people now, three generations, and we did everything to get the permission to stay in the country house, but the local town hall employees worked slowly. Most of them worked from home. We heard of people being hunted out of their holiday homes by the police. We hid the car in the barn and ordered food by mail. No problem for flour and noodles but a big problem for fresh food. No ‘Amazon fresh’ in the area, no supermarket delivery. So, I placed an order at an animal supply: 25 kilos of carrots for horses, 25 kilos of beetroot for chicken and 25 kilos of potatoes for pigs. That was all I could get on the internet. We were very creative in baking and cooking with these three ingredients. Luckily, we got eggs from our neighbor. I paid exorbitantly high prices for two liters of apple-juice or a glass of almond mousse. We hid, not knowing whether they would let us stay. The police car passed the village street on a daily basis. Only people with a business were allowed to stay. Was our little hobby garden chair
building business big enough to warrant five people and a baby staying? My husband had been working online for years, now I also tried to teach my Berlin pupils online, reading stories on Skype and giving homework for homeschooling. My younger daughter and the young father of the baby followed online university lectures, so we had to follow strict timetables for internet use, because in the countryside it was slow, just enough for one zoom conference, when nobody else was using their phone.

Meanwhile my younger son and his girlfriend moved into our flat in Berlin, because they had given up their flats and jobs to emigrate to Canada on the 1st of April. The borders to the US and Canada were closed, the flights cancelled. So, they stayed in our flat, trying to reimagine their future, thinking that by June or July they would be allowed to go. My son finished his first novel and his girlfriend made glass ornaments on the balcony to sell in her little Etsy shop as “Sunday-glass”.

The older son, living in downtown Manhattan with his pregnant wife, saw the numbers going up and was locked down in a tiny apartment 24 hours a day, working online from his kitchen, while she was spending her day netflixing in bed because there was nowhere else to go, counting the days until the birth in May.

I didn’t know then how things would develop, I thought of writing it all down, but I couldn’t, because my only thoughts were for food and security. How could I feed my family without having to go back to Berlin, without being stopped by a policeman asking me why I was in the county, risking village people’s lives?

We didn’t leave our property, talked with neighbors only over the garden fence. I worked in the garden every day, preparing seedbeds, sowing seeds full of hope. Would these little seeds be our only food in summer? Would factories remain open? Would farmers still work in the fields and produce food for us? Would Italy be able to deliver tomatoes and noodles? What do we import from France? Where does our food come from anyway? Food was the main topic. We baked our own bread, indulged ourselves with cakes and biscuits, cooked a hot meal every day. Had I known back then that everybody would be okay, I would have enjoyed all the time spent in the garden and kitchen. But nobody knew what news the next day would bring.

My daughter breast-fed her little son and he grew up in the countryside surrounded by father, grandparents and aunt. Lucky little one. He put every flower into his little mouth and
insisted on sleeping outside in his pram only, crying in the house until he was brought out into the fresh spring air. Do I become a criminal staying in my country house instead of leaving for Berlin?

Easter came in April and my Berlin son was not allowed to come and visit. No tourists in Mecklenburg! The Baltic sea waves rolled only for the locals. Normally there would have been open studio exhibitions on the Whitsun weekend. My painter friends and I had prepared our exhibition, but when it was allowed last minute, we couldn’t work out a hygiene concept that fulfilled all the rules - so we cancelled. Painters and viewers would have had to wear masks, no touching of things, one way in, one way out, regular disinfection, police control. I didn’t want it, expecting it to be better in October for the next open studios in Berlin. Luckily, I had my teaching job to pay the bills. Berlin gave millions to actors, artists, musicians, yoga teachers, restaurant and club owners. But still it didn’t pay all their bills. My father was right with his old saying: You cannot live on your art. Learn something else to pay the bills. Security first. There it was again.

My best friend in England celebrated her birthday baking a cake, delivering pieces to her friends on bike and then eating the cake in a Zoom meeting together. In the evening they met other friends on Zoom, played games and drank wine.

Another friend sent half-forbidden videos; things the government would not want to be watched. Do I become a criminal watching videos saying that this crisis was organized to change the world? Do I become a criminal watching herbalist videos, because the nice woman showing the plants and their healing powers does not shop in supermarkets, because she does not want to wear a mask and so her video was taken off the internet? Another friend sent a video accusing the government of knowing that there are control chips in the vaccination, or substances making us die from cancer because there are too many people on the earth! Am I allowed to write about this? Why do they all listen to the WHO and at the same time this organization is in court, because some of them violated African women before giving them food for their families? Am I allowed to think that this would indeed be a perfect time to try out the newest human shaped robots, because everybody wears masks and keeps a distance? I think many things are possible but hope they are not. Other grandmothers became criminals, too. A journalist wrote in a Berlin newspaper that his old aunt, whose name may not be named, asked him to take her to the border of
Mecklenburg. She had already arranged a Mecklenburg car which would meet them on a little forest road. She wanted to be picked up from the same place again three days later, after her sister’s birthday. She wouldn’t phone him again in case spies listened. The journalist asked himself what the world had come to.

I started reading the Bible to calm myself down.” Your kingdom come”, not the one of the wicked or enemies. My qi-gong master is online now, teaching to follow all state covid rules and at the same time meditate for peace. The great Indian spiritual teacher Amma says: Follow the rules and pray.

I took my brush and painted, letting go of words, reason and my left part of the brain. First there were abstract paintings with our garden earth, sand and wood-stove ashes, but then I painted pictures of women fulfilling their dreams in a small magic room in the middle of Berlin, where everything is possible: You can paint, have a garden, dance with a shaman, have a horse, the beach, drink tea with a wolf, meet your shadow, be Super-girl or read. Each day there was a new painting. The nights were not for sleeping but for having ideas.
In the internet there were calls for artists: #supportartists, #artistsupportpledge or #buyarts. You sell your paintings on this platform for no more than 200 Euros and every time you reach 1000 Euros you pledge to buy another artist’s work for 200 Euro. My paintings were in Berlin and with the fresh ones I couldn’t part. They were so different. I had never painted women before. I had been an abstract painter. Why did I change? At the same time, I stopped writing fiction and started documentary writing. Some writers escape into fiction when the world gets complicated, I realized that what was happening in the world looked like fiction. In my paintings I found my personal escape room. I used that room on a daily basis.

Is the virus reminding us that life is not endless? That we have to fulfil our dreams now, not later? That family time is more important than cinema, theatre and restaurants? Was I still me? Who am I anyway? The self is only partly conscious, most of it are unconscious memories and thoughts. The whole is always changing. Does this outer virus world change my inner world? Of course! Were those parts of me that come up now already existing unconsciously, deep inside or are they new acquaintances, accessoires?

**In May** my second grandson was born in New York. In spite of photos of lorries with corpses in the news, my son was allowed to accompany his wife. They had a healthy baby and were allowed to stay one day and one night in the hospital together. Then they went home and the midwife took care of them via facetime. We haven’t visited our grandchild yet, but we see him in video calls. He is smiling, growing in the little air-conditioned apartment, leading his happy little life on the 35th floor of the silver tower in Manhattan while his 4-month-older cousin enjoys the fresh country air in the North of Germany.

No more Fridays for future but the air became clearer every day, in Venice there were dolphins in the canals and you could see the bottom of the water for the first time in years. Is the virus a climate solution?

**In June** the schools in Berlin reopened. I had loads of emails instructing me how to behave at school, when to wear a mask, how often to wash hands, where to enter the building and where to leave it. For the first time in weeks, I started the car and drove down the motorway to Berlin. What a strange feeling of freedom after three months of not leaving the village. Nature had changed. I had left the city in March and now it was June. The chestnut trees in my street in Berlin had wonderful green leaves, full of June power, but strangely enough I
didn’t dare to embrace my son and his girlfriend. They had lived in the city. Our flat had changed. It was somehow theirs now. Or had I changed? I felt like a stranger. But the strangeness wore off quickly. I enjoyed being allowed to shop in the supermarkets and seeing my old father again who had been taken care of by my sister and brother. How lucky demented people are. He reads the newspaper every morning, he listens to the radio the whole day and to the TV in the evening but he still does not know what Corona or COVID-19 is. When we tell him he insists on seeing us, even kissing us because the old German king used to say to his soldiers: Do you want to live forever? (before he pushed them onto the battlefield)

Musicians played on the internet or in little squares in the city. Opera singers met to sing on the balcony of their London Quarantine Hotel. People were more creative than they had been for a long time. My son went to a corona wedding with 10 people near Munich. All the other guests sent postcards, presents, films or joined via facetime. The ice-cream man had painted distance lines on the pavement, the restaurant put deck-chairs on the market square to keep the proper distance. Other people wore swimming noodles on their heads for distancing. The certificates for the final school exams were handed out in churches or drive-in-cinemas.

The elementary school children were happy to meet at least half of their friends again and did not mind wearing masks in the hallways. In the schoolyard they were entertained with games to keep the distance and after much consideration basketballs were handed out, which had to be washed in special ball-washing-contraptions which the caretaker had built while school had been closed. The windows and doors were kept open and birdsong filled the classrooms. At least the parents had a two-days-a-week-four-hours-break from homeschooling. Happy children, happy parents, happy teachers.

Not-happy elderly friends! My oldest yoga friend, usually strong and positive, said that she had become depressive. She was not allowed to see her grandchildren. Locked in, the television gave her the feeling of not being wanted and of nearing the end of her life.

Sentences like “Just to protect the damned elderly we young ones can’t go out and party”, hurt her feelings. Next thing was being bullied in the supermarket: “What do you want here? Stay home. You are a risk patient.” Other friends over 70 visited their grandchildren secretly
in the dark or outside. “Don’t touch granny or she will die!”, their daughters kept screaming hysterically.

In the newspaper you could read stories about old people being found dead in their flats with masks on. They had been afraid to go outside or ask for help.

In the US other problems came up. “Black lives matter” started a revolution. No masks. No hygiene concepts. No social distancing. How can they do that to us in the midst of Corona? Can’t the black wait until we solved our pandemic problems? No, they cannot! Covid is not our only problem!

In Greece some refugees burnt down their camp Moria to get into Europe. People slept on the roads waiting to be saved but Europe feared the pull effect. “How can they do that to us in the midst of Corona? Can’t the refugees wait until we solved our pandemic problems?” No, they cannot. Problems cannot wait. Problems want to be solved immediately.

Viruses also do not wait. They are mean: They multiply in us.

In July the summer holidays brought relaxation. I still did not know anybody who actually had Corona. Travelling inside Germany was allowed. People travelling to European countries with high-risk areas had to be tested after their return. Our neighbors came back after nine months on Lanzarote, one hour before the Canaries were declared high-risk territory. So, no
quarantine for them. Young families, holidaying at the North Sea beaches kept asking each
other: “And where did you want to go originally?”. Most of them preferred holidays in
Southern countries. Now Bavarians got to know the Northern German Baltic Sea instead of
the Italian coast. In Berlin people could meet in the parks and I could go back to the
countryside, see how the salad had grown under the hands of my husband still working from
home, my stranded son, his stranded girl-friend, my bachelor-thesis-writing-student-
daughter, young-mother-daughter, student-son-in-law and grandson. The house was full,
too full, but luckily it was summer and everybody was outside all day long, forgetting
Corona. No television, no radio, no newspaper. Just the news trying to pop up when using
the computer or the smartphone. Would I be able to write now? Yes. But the weather was
too nice to sit in front of the screen and food needed to be prepared for eight people and
the washing to be done and the weeding, the watering, the harvesting and jam cooking. I
sometimes envied the painter Hilma Af Klint whose biography I was reading because she
lived on her own. Male Artists were served by their wives. Picasso or Charles Dickens would
never have dreamt of doing the washing-up or cooking for their wives and children. So much
more time to paint or write.

Two friends visited for a spraying week-end. Of course, we cooked and baked, but there was
lots of time to try out new paints and materials. Even the masks you needed when you work
with spray paint were no problem.

But then the Corona bomb hit again. My husband, main breadwinner of the family, lost his
job and would be unemployed from January onwards. His company was severely hit by
Corona. No more assignments. We looked at each other. No. Not now! Not with three
unemployed, two students and a baby to feed. But that was it. “Congratulations”, said my
son-in-law, “You are the only breadwinner of the family now! You are feeding us all.” I
didn’t know whether I liked this new role model, this upgrading to breadwinner. Happy
summer holidays!

In August school started and we teachers had three days of Corona instruction meetings.
The plan for the new school year included a divided school yard, hand-washing before and
after the breaks for 650 pupils at 10 washbasins, and to have all pupils together in the
classroom again, windows and doors open and wearing masks in the hallways. Astonishingly
it worked out okay for the schools but not quite so well for the returning holidaymakers, party people and big families celebrating what they had not celebrated for the last six months. The infection numbers went up but the number of tests taken went up, too. Why did people have forbidden parties and then get tested afterwards?

On the **11th of September** Germany tried its first all-over Catastrophe Alarm. All sirens were supposed to go off. I was afraid of the noise, took earplugs with me. We didn’t hear anything. There are hardly any sirens left in Berlin since the war. Had the state cooperated with the church, there would at least have been church bells ringing. But inside me there were questions: What do we really need countrywide alarms for? Which catastrophes are we to expect? Is there something we should know? Does Mrs. Merkel know something we don’t know? It can’t be just wind or rain? Maybe a meteorite? My old-lady friend and ex-dentist announced visitors from outer space. The last time she did this her children considered placing her into psychiatric care. So narrow-minded! In the 1980s my English literature professor lectured officially about Ufo-sightings and was paid for it!

**In October** the infection numbers in Berlin rose, the Corona traffic-lights went red, redder, reddest. Two days before the Autumn holidays Berlin was declared a high-risk area. So other areas of Germany cancelled holiday bookings for Berliners. Locked-in again? You were allowed to travel with a negative test result not older than 48 hours, but of course only people with symptoms were tested. If you didn’t have any symptoms you had to pay 160 Euros to be tested and the results could take more than 48 hours. No guarantee. A friend of mine started her holidays on an island in the North Sea two days earlier than planned for fear that Berliners might be shut out. I started to panic. I was alone in Berlin. My family was waiting in the countryside. Mecklenburg was one of the strictest areas concerning Corona. Would the Berlin Wall close? How would we get food? In the time of the Wall the government always arranged storages of butter and coal. What was stored now? Nothing!

The night before the holidays I wrote an email to my school director, took the next day off, jumped into my car and drove out of the city. I took the small roads, always expecting to be stopped by the police. Up till then people with a second home were allowed to enter Mecklenburg, but it could change any day, any minute. It was dark. I was alone. It started to rain ... but I was alright. I arrived safely. My family had gone shopping in the morning. Why did I worry? What did the situation trigger? Something deep in me. A place unknown. A storage of fear. Will we ever be safe again? Who is this worrying person? Is that really me?
I tried to relax, baked cakes and served lunch for our guests, my son’s future parents-in-law from Munich who helped to restore the old carpentry next door. We took the dog for a walk, cooked raspberry jam, applesauce and sieved little glass splinters, plastic and metal parts out of the earth. No television, no radio, no newspaper, silence with geese and the song of cranes gathering for the great flight south. Time to write, time to read, time to think what happened to us this year. Why was 2020 so different? The typical chaos before a change?

My old lady friend (former dentist) sent me an alarming video about the plans of Cern in Switzerland, wanting to accelerate their energy processing and to produce a parallel universe or catapult the earth into another dimension. The video was full of physics. Were the scientists crazy? Who controls them anyway? Who am I to decide whether it was really possible? Why me? I didn’t tell my family. I didn’t risk a discussion. More and more secrets, thoughts I better didn’t utter. The next morning my daughter sent me another video: “I know the plans I have for you”, says the Lord. I definitely felt better after that.

My personality changed. I used to be the reassuring sunshine of my environment and now I need reassuring myself. I wouldn’t say that my psyche is unstable, but at times I get very emotional and destabilized by the news. Then I can’t keep my heart quiet. Even after over 30 years of Yoga and meditation the core of my being gets unsettled. But I know exactly how to enhance my well-being: more me-time, reading books instead of newspapers, listen to podcasts rather than the news, watching the birds in the sky instead of television, walk the dog, paint, listen to music, write, do Yoga, breathe, listen to my heart, listen to my body, listen to my soul. In general, it is a ban on the outer world and outer travels and an invitation to the inner world and inner travels. At the same time reaching out to the information I need, to know the rules, sometimes living the life of a half-criminal trickster to do what I like. Life has become more demanding and threatened but at the same time I’ve become more creative in finding new solutions and a more personal way of life.

I think, our responsibility as artists is to help others find their way to their unique source of creativity which is the essence of the human being. If the virus mutates, let’s change, too!