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Collecting in the time of COVID

Throughout its history, State Library Victoria has built a record of the lives of Victorians, from important events to everyday experiences. In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was unfolding, it was clear that the Library needed to document and record the disease's impact in Victoria through rapid-response contemporary collecting. To capture a broad range of stories and documentation, the Library launched three projects, each with a different focus. This article gives brief introductions to the projects and the new collections they have inspired.

Memory Bank: Collective Isolation Project

In April 2020, the Library launched the Memory Bank: Collective Isolation Project, which aimed to engage with the state's community of citizen collectors. Using a series of 21 weekly prompts, the Library invited Victorians via its social media and web platforms to contribute documentary material recording their own individual experiences during the pandemic. The prompts covered themes such as pantry contents, social activities, furry companions, public health, exercise and wellbeing and allowed collection and curatorial staff to guide the types of materials collected, according to what might be important for future generations of researchers.

The Memory Bank received hundreds of physical and digital items, including photographs, shopping lists, illustrated journals and a hand-stitched



'A young busker, dressed in black, singing John Denver and Elton John songs at Mount Waverley Village shopping centre, on a Sunday morning 27 September 2020, during 2nd wave COVID-19 lockdown.' Dominique Dunstan, *Covid rocket man*, 2020, MS 16313/22/24. (Quotations in captions are the donors' or creators' written descriptions of the images.)

face mask. Before the pandemic, submissions to the Library collection involved face-to-face interactions and physical handovers, even for digital content, but as these were impossible during the lockdowns, Library staff implemented contact-free methods for acquisition of collection items. Once onsite access resumed, the physical items were held in the Library's temperature- and humidity-controlled storage facilities, and the digital items will be transferred into Rosetta, the digital repository and preservation system. All Memory Bank items will be discoverable and accessible through the Library's catalogue.

Descriptive information about items was gathered from their donors via webforms or spreadsheets, and this will be used to catalogue the material. The Library's collection staff usually interpret and research items to create this information, but the new method allowed creators and donors themselves to assign titles to their items, as well as to provide details about how and where they were created or collected.

Although Memory Bank will result in a significant archive of material documenting this period, it was not simply a collecting project; it also aimed to connect the Library's online community through engagement with its



Left: 'Crowd of Spoonville characters as the population grows at Poets Grove Spoonville ... Elwood.' Sarah Ryan, *Spoonville, Poets Grove Family & Children's Centre, Elwood*, 2020, MS 16313/22/14



Right: 'Lady Toilet Roll is my creative diary. I started out with the core of a toilet roll and created a character who has been posting every day on her own Facebook page. She started on the 23rd March 2020 and is a reflection of what is happening in society. Everything that is used is from my home, nothing has been purchased.' Diane Rose, *Lady Toilet Roll has a Zoom meeting*, 2020, MS 16313/22/106



'My kid Daphne ... age 5, going for a swim in an improvised pool in the lounge room. Lanes are made from belts and ribbons, and water indicated by blue paper and fabric.' Joanna Anderson, *Lounge room swim*, 2020, MS 16313/22/103



Left: 'Today meets 20 years since my dad served in East Timor with 6RAR [6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment]. He is also a Victorian representative from the 6RAR Association. My mum, Janet is currently working in a COVID-19 screening clinic. Thank you to our healthcare men and women, there's no mistake that you are our nation's heroes too. Emma Rahman.' Janet Rahman, *Dawn service in lockdown, 2020*, MS 16313/22/75

Right: 'The list was for a couple and an 11 month old baby. Most items were placed as an order with Woolworth online, the meat was with Donatis on Lygon Street, Italian items from DOC Deli on Lygon Street. The items in squares were not available, I wasn't able to buy the sugar because I already had two sugar items (molassas and demerara) and there was a limit of 2 sugar items per shop. The bottom left corner is the menu for the week – E for meals Emily would make, A for meals Andrew would make.' Emily Shumborski, *COVID shopping list, 2020*, MS 16313/1/35

Facebook group. The pandemic brought many challenges, not least adjusting to a degree of social disconnection, and the project encouraged people to engage and share some of their experiences online. Through the many Facebook posts and comments, it became clear that a supportive community built up around the project.

Photographing the Pandemic

During the Library's closure and periods of limited reopening, staff created a photographic archive documenting their local neighbourhoods for the project Photographing the Pandemic. At the outset, the project leaders suggested

Woolies delivery \$209.30

- mushrooms ✓
- chayote ✓
- broken onions ✓
- chestnuts ✓
- arugula ✓
- red onion x3 ✓
- broccolini ✓
- Dates ✓
- coconut milk? ✓
- meat ✓
- salmon ✓
- blender ✓

Drill

- curiander ✓
- honey ✓
- kiwi (golden) ✓
- orange ✓
- potatoes ✓
- honey corn flakes ✓
- Kids waetbix ✓
- nudie juice ✓

butta

- Yogurt ✓
- Amor Valley milk ✓
- Creme fraiche ✓
- butta milk ✓
- Kiri cream cheese ✓
- pita ✓
- bread crumbs ✓
- molassas ✓
- Sugar ✓
- demerara sugar ✓
- 50g almonds + cashews ✓
- 30g pepitas ✓
- sunflower ✓

DOC

- Ricotta (Buffalo) ✓
- Pavlova ✓
- soppressata + bresaola ✓
- cheese ✓

For baby

- salmon ✓
- pumpkin ✓
- sweet potato ✓
- broccoli ✓
- strawberries ✓

other

- Oat bars - Sweet ✓
- Pancakes - Casey Wall ✓

Donatis \$57.25

- 3 x chicken breasts ✓
- 500g beef chuck ✓
- 500g chicken thigh (bone in) ✓
- 500g lamb leg (bone in) ✓
- 500g bacon ✓

S lamb w/pita (A)

M Japanese chicken - Ratsop (A)

T Salmon pasta (E)

W massaman curry (E) spirithes PJ. 136

TR Rav w/ tomato

F cardamon chicken (E) Jerusalem pg. 84

SAT mushroom + chestnut pie (E)



‘This image was taken in West Street Meats, in the late afternoon. Bryan and Rosalyn are a husband and wife team who run the shop and are featured here in early lockdown finding it a little difficult to maintain social distancing.’ Michael Gillis, *Brian and Rosalyn*, 2020



‘Playground equipment in Greensborough “closed” by Banyule City Council in response to government restrictions to reduce community transmission for COVID-19.’ Joanna Crabbe, *Taped off children’s playground at Gladman Street Reserve*, 2020



Left: 'A road sign on Springhill Road near Emu Creek with "Covid hoax" conspiracy graffiti.' Jarno Coone, 'Covid hoax' spray painted on back of road sign, 2020



Right: 'Interior of Marios Café in Fitroy North, showing Mario De Pasquale with a range of groceries sold in the café during the restriction of in-door dining.' Savina Hopkins, *Marios Café, interior with Mario De Pasquale*, 2020

some subject areas, including shops and businesses, public transport, public spaces, COVID-19 messaging, community goodwill gestures and changes in street scenery. However, the participants reached further than this, due to their enthusiasm and the evolving nature of their lived environments. Staff also photographed events that occurred during the year, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, and important cultural and personal occasions that were transformed by the pandemic restrictions, such as Anzac Day and funeral services.

The collection currently contains almost 2000 images, which will be stored and preserved in Rosetta and made accessible through the Library's website once cataloguing is complete.

Some of the staff members who contributed to the project noted their thoughts about it:

I'm enjoying the project immensely. Criminal amount of fun. My interpretation of the brief was broad and my pics are a wide-ranging record of the neighbourhood in lockdown covering lots of things ... I saw it as an artistic enterprise and primarily the expression of a sensibility. (Ian Cox, conservator, books)



Right: 'Crowded protest scene, protestors wearing masks. Sign visible that reads "WE HAVE 432 DEATHS WE WANT 432 CONVICTIONS" and several that read "BLACK LIVES MATTER".' Caroline Anderson, *Stop black deaths in custody: justice for George Floyd #BLM protest*, 2020



Right: 'This image was taken during an online Irish Funeral under the Pandemic. Due to international travel restrictions, this service was streamed and watched online.' Michael Gillis, *Irish funeral*, 2020

I feel like it plays to some of my strengths/interests – creativity, visual communication, attention to detail – in a way that is exciting and interesting, while still being aligned to the collection principles of State Library Victoria. (Savina Hopkins, preservation technician)

It felt meaningful, contributing a small part towards a larger body of documentation captured by the Library. It's been terrific seeing everyone's photographs via [Microsoft] Yammer, I really look forward to what others are posting each day – and it's been so nice to get a glimpse of places outside my neighbourhood! (Jessye Wdowin-McGregor, preservation technician)

Rural and Regional Photography Commission

The events of 2020 had a tremendous impact on rural and regional Victorians. A devastating bushfire season preceded by years of drought was followed quickly by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Library's Rural and Regional Photography Commission worked with four professional photographers connected to regional areas to capture community stories and to ensure that regional Victoria was not forgotten in the Library's collecting efforts.



Don Ashby is rebuilding his home in Mallacoota, which was lost in the 2019 bushfires. He is being helped by a friend. These lists are reminders of the tasks needed to be done. Tiffany Garvie, *Don Ashby's list of tasks to rebuild his home, lost in the 2019 bushfire, 2020*

The photographers were Tiffany Garvie, Fabiana Guerreiro, Aldona Kmiec and James Wiltshire. In total, 350 images were acquired. The photographic stories featured businesses affected by bushfire and COVID restrictions; individuals adapting to working and schooling from home; frontline workers; regional industries, such as agriculture, flower-growing, fishing and beekeeping; those who had lost their homes; and people who had contributed in various ways to their own communities. Areas covered included Mallacoota, Apollo Bay, Colac, Albury-Wodonga, Bairnsdale and Foster.

A selection of images from the project will be on display in the Library's Victoria Gallery until December 2021. The full collection will be stored and preserved in Rosetta and made available online via the catalogue. The opportunity to undertake this work during lockdown has enabled the Library to engage local photographers to build a significant collection of material reflecting regional experiences. The project will continue as funds from the Library's 2021 fundraising appeal will allow more rural and regional photographers to be commissioned to document many more stories from around Victoria.



Amy Harbour, parent of two children, working from home while home schooling. Fabiana Guerreiro, Amy Harbour at home, Apollo Bay, south-west Victoria, 2020



Jake Greaves runs a husky tours business in the Alpine Shire region of Victoria. COVID-19 meant that he was unable to operate his business. Aldona Kmiec, Jake Greaves pictured with one of his many husky dogs, 2020