

# Pandemic Genres: Processing the COVID-19 Pandemic through Electronic Literature

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Some of the works featured in the COVID E-Lit exhibition highlight the fact that the experience of the pandemic was in some sense beyond words. Jody Zellen's *Ghost City, Avenue S* is a visual diary of the pandemic that reinforces the idea that earlier forms of digital narrative and net art could be better suited, or at least present alternatives, to chronicling the experience of the pandemic than corporate social media platforms. *Ghost City* itself is a net art work that Zellen initiated in 1997, during an earlier era of the Web – *Ghost City* was a featured work in the Electronic Literature Organization's first exhibition at the State of the Arts symposium in 2002. In the catalog for that exhibition, Zellen described the work as using “the space of the web as a sculptural space, allowing viewers to interact with animated graphics to delve deeper and deeper into an imaginary city.” It is “a labyrinthine environment through which viewers can navigate, either following the linear narrative that unfolds by moving from page to page, or they can delve into the non-linear chaos of random links” (ELMCIP 2002). The project uses language minimally, primarily relying on images and animations to get its narrative across. At the onset of the pandemic in 2020, Zellen felt drawn to return to the work: “this was a really good opportunity to try to return to making what I call net art [...] It really developed and is developing as a kind of pandemic journal. It's like my response to what's around me or what I see in the news or how I'm feeling as a series of photographs or web pages with rollovers and animations and snippets of text that either I wrote or somebody else wrote and just trying to make a really in-depth project that touches on everything that that we're feeling” (Zellen et al. 2021).

*Ghost City, Avenue S* revives web design elements that were common in net art of the 1990s and early 2000s, such as rollover image swaps, pop-up windows, and single image animations that viewers click through one frame at a time. The work is a throwback to the early Web era of handcrafted HTML and “homepages.” Zellen's is very much a back-to-basics approach and again marks a post-digital (or perhaps post-platform) nostalgia for what now seems like a more innocent time. The fact that Zellen used the already-obsolete platform of Flash to produce the animations reinforces the degree to which the work revives the Web aesthetics of earlier periods. At the same time, the images and animations are also of the specific moment of the pandemic. Zellen embraces a collage aesthetic and pulls in material both from the web and from her localized experience of Los Angeles. As she notes above, the work focuses on emotional response to the pandemic, on “everything that we're feeling.” The experience of the work is an affective one that variously represent feelings of loss, loneliness, frustration, isolation, and hope.

# I miss





Figures 6-8. Screenshots from *Ghost City, Avenue S*.

*Ghost City, Avenue S* merges Zellen's localized first-person perspective with animations that reflect the larger global impacts of the pandemic, for example with fields of tiny stick figures that represent the thousands of people who perished from COVID-19, or visualizations of comparative unemployment statistics from different countries around the world. As in the pages of *Ghost City* she produced 25 years earlier, much of the material in the work is found art. Zellen's animations are interspersed with photographs Zellen took on her walks through the emptied cityscape of Los Angeles that communicate both the eerie silences of cities during the early pandemic and gestures of hope, such as the ubiquitous sidewalk drawings and handmade signs that people used to express hope for the future or to thank nurses and other frontline workers. Zellen integrated these materials with animations that captured feelings of isolation and frustration common during the pandemic: "I just animate this, what I see as a kind of anonymous figure, that moves through different situations. And in some ways, I think maybe that's a kind of kind of self-portrait. It's like there's this silhouetted figure kind of banging its head against the wall and then plopping down. And it's just like, you know, again and again and again." (Zellen et al. 2021)

During a period when she had very little contact with other people, Zellen took advantage of the fact that she was able to go for long walks in the sunshine of Los Angeles as the basis for a kind of Situationist *dérive*—walking with a reflective artistic intention as she documented a city changed by the pandemic. The work becomes both an eyewitness account of the locked down and lonely city and a project of personal catharsis. The fact that the piece uses language so minimally suggests that some aspects of the experience of the pandemic are beyond language, or leave us incapable of utterance. The narrativization here is one that uses images to produce affect in a way that language alone could not.