

Marlies de Munck and Pascal Gielen, *Nearness: Art and Education after Covid-19* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020), 57 pp. ISBN 9789492095879; RRP: \$12.50 (US).

This short text, whimsically illustrated by Lotte Lara Schröder, is a series of brief essays that address the relationships human beings have with art, education, and intimacy. The stepping off point is Covid-19 and the profound impact that shifting core human activities online has had and will continue to have if virtual life extends into the future. The first section is titled “People Are Like Works of Art”. The authors assert that “The human longing for presence is of all times” (p. 15), while acknowledging that we have flexibly rearranged social activities to ‘meet’ for drinks and conversation on Zoom and other platforms, and to teach and learn via digital media, too. “Secrets” reflects on images of loved people appearing on screen; small children seeing their grandmother are not, it is asserted, overjoyed but rather lost and disappointed as they long for the hugs that meeting up in the ‘real world’ would involve. “Magic” discusses Walter Benjamin’s ideas about the replication of the image, how modern photography dispelled the magic, and concludes that we, in an image-saturated society, “no longer experience the same satisfaction when looking at an image as people [then] did” (p. 27).

The second section is titled “Looking for Life”. A recurrent theme is the basic importance of the human body, the fundamental need to perform (music, for example, or drama, opera and other embodied creative forms) in the presence of “other resonating, living bodies” (p. 36). Even art on the walls of galleries is richer when viewed in person, rather than as images on a virtual gallery site. This leads to reflections on how much time contemporary humans use up being passive consumers at home, both of images (Netflix and the life) and of sound (Spotify, Apple Music). The great benefit of making music yourself, or creating art, or even cooking, is implied. Anything can be ‘art’, “As long as it stimulates new *life*. Isn’t creation about creating life, after all?” (p. 45). “Frankenstein” raises the spectre of the economy as driver of culture and life, and cautions against art and artists being too engaged with the political process. The last two essays, “Vibration” and “Heart” discuss the importance of aesthetics, and the value of experiences that are inexpressible, that make us “speechless” (p. 52). Engaging with the world through the senses is often dismissed as emotional or self-indulgent, but arguably these experiences have cognitive impact and feed human growth.

DeMunck and Gielen argue against the idea that art is made only by artists, preferring to foreground the infusion of energy and creativity into life by all people who engage with making things and inspiring others. They see a place for all types of human ‘makers’, the artist can be “both a revolutionary and a diehard conservative” (p. 56). They liken Covid-19 to the human heart ceasing to beat. This is a disaster, it means death. Consequently, their book is a call to re-engage with art and life, to bring oneself and one’s community back to life by making the heartbeat again. These are valuable ideas and the book is accessible to a varied readership.

**Carole M. Cusack**  
University of Sydney