

**U-jazdowski**

24/03–11/06/2023

exhibition

# Miriam Elia

***The New Normal***

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## *The New Normal*

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# Subverting The New Normal

*Satire is moral outrage transformed  
into comic art.*

Philip Roth

Now that everyday life generally feels like it's back to normal, the global panic caused by the coronavirus outbreak feels like a horrible dystopian nightmare. The outbreak of Covid-19, which began in China in 2019 and became a global pandemic by March 2020, led to a range of worldwide measures of lockdown, the closure of schools, universities, offices, public events, public gatherings, concerts, religious services, museums, galleries, concerts, travel, funerals, the dying – I could go on, it is a collective universal memory, it stunned the entire world.

In cultural circles, hardly anyone dared to question the state-approved science, such as the efficacy of cheap, mass-produced masks in containing the virus, or the inhumanity of social distancing. Miriam Elia is one of those minority voices, she questions and comments on the state of the western world through humour, by affectionately borrowing the style and aesthetics of the much-loved children's Key Words with Peter and Jane educational books from Ladybird, which were launched in 1964.



*playing is hazardous*  
2020  
illustration from the book  
*We do Lockdown*

Miriam Elia's work can be taken as paying homage to a time of optimism, of innocent British nostalgia, of playful learning, a journey of discovery and adventure, through happy images of smiling children exploring and discovering a world of wonder, as it was then. But there is subversive mimicry at play. Miriam's art satirises contemporary culture, the politics and the ideologies that drive the engines of a globalised world. Her satire is part of a great tradition of political art and graphics that began with the revolutionary invention of mass producing words and images through print for the common man and woman at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Like great political satirists before her; William Hogarth, Francisco Goya, John Heartfield, George Grosz and Karl Arnold come to mind, Miriam Elia pokes fun at the new socio-political order. She questions the new rules of the game that was played out during the pandemic and lockdown, she assesses the aftershock and the new world order, otherwise known as 'The Great Reset', a global initiative started by the World Economic Forum, which plans to re-order the very fabric of our lives under the deceptively benign mission of increasing co-operation between global stakeholders.

A selection of original artworks, which became the basis for her two Dung Beetle reading scheme books, *We do Lockdown* (2020) and her most recent book *We see the sights* (2022), are on display. Images of Mummy, Susan and John go through a journey of isolation, disengagement, public spaces and buildings marked out by hazard tape.

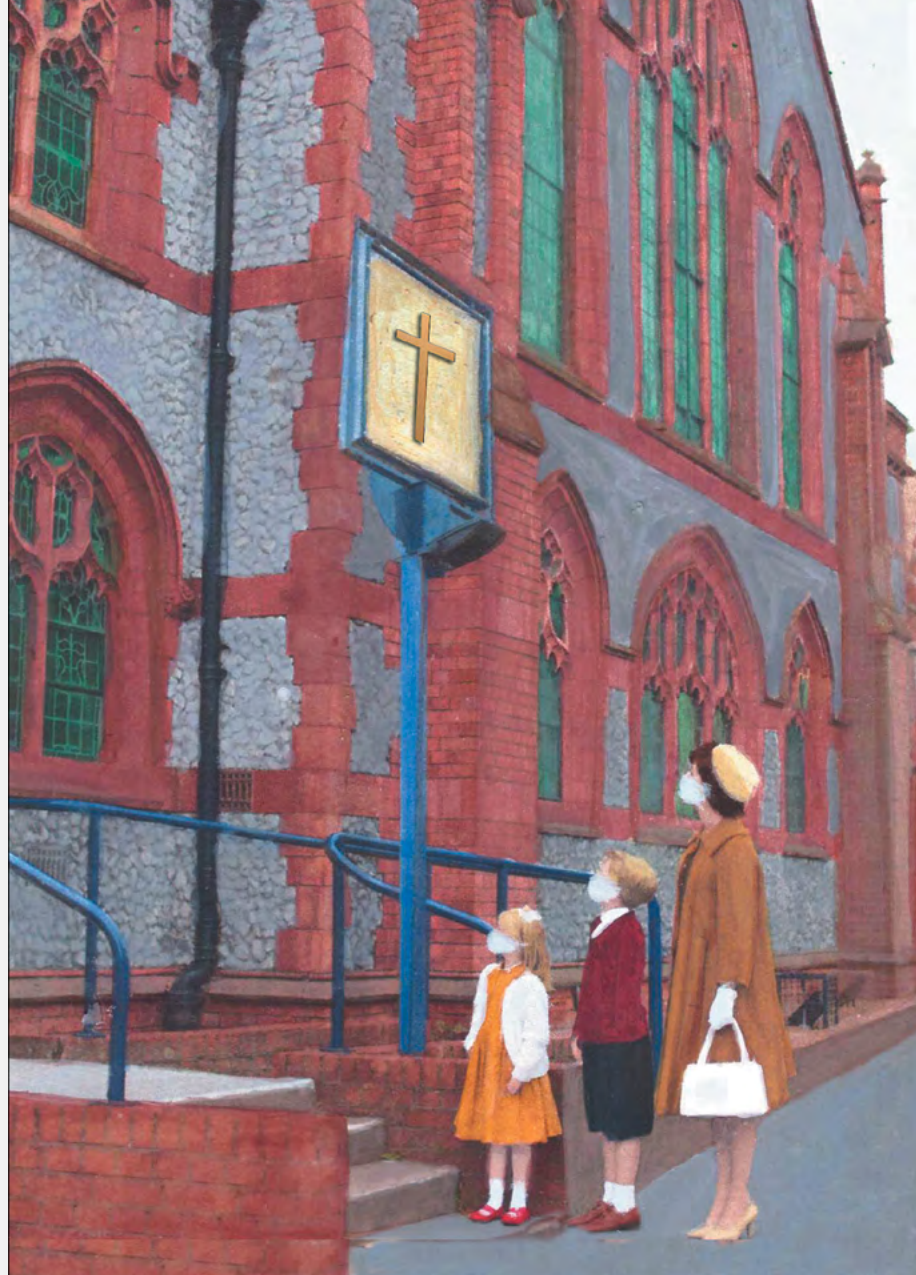


*gender fluid lolly*  
2022  
illustration from the book  
*We see the sights*

*next-day delivery militia*  
2022  
illustration from the book  
*We see the sights*

*Do as you're told* shows a masked mother with her children, looking up at a locked down Church. Atheist Mummy says, "I'm glad the church is shut," and when her son, John, questions her, she responds that the Christian church uses "fear and guilt to control people." The state has become the new religion to control and feed fear into its citizens. References to past puritanical religious zealotry is reincarnated into secularist draconian control in Miriam's art, in the unquestioning mantra that we must "trust the science"; the closure of children's playgrounds as depicted in *playing is hazardous*, reminds us of past strands of Protestantism, particularly Calvinist Presbyterian, in Scotland and Northern Ireland, when children's playgrounds were chained up on Sundays to stop children from having fun.

*Original sin* is an uncomfortable image, depicting what looks like a 1960s–70s setting of Susan and John watching an old-style television in their living room. The programme they are watching on the screen is not entertainment, but that of an old man on a ventilator "again". Mummy, matter of factly instructs them, "that's what happens if you hug old people," which makes Susan cry. Many old people died alone while the young were accused of being super-spreaders.



*do as you're told*  
2020  
illustration from the book  
*We do Lockdown*



*insects of authority*  
2022  
illustration from the book  
*We see the sights*

*zero impact anywhere*  
2022  
illustration from the book  
*We see the sights*

Photographer, filmmaker and author of *A State of Fear: How the UK government weaponised fear during the Covid-19 pandemic* (2021) Laura Dodsworth, wrote: “Beyond counting the dead, how do we count the cost to ourselves? Dying alone in a hospice, last rites delivered in full PPE, no family beside the bed. People unable to visit elderly relatives in care homes for months. Funerals limited to ten people. The young calling suicide helplines, bewildered and traumatised.”

The only certainty in life is that we will all die, but was the cost of the extreme lockdown and the self-isolation worth it, when joy, happiness, family, community, pleasure and friendship were all sucked out of our lives by the state and “experts”?

The exhibition takes the viewer on a journey of re-awakening after the excesses of lockdown. Like the characters in the Portuguese writer José Saramago’s 1995 novel *Blindness*, where an epidemic of unexplained blindness sweeps an un-named country, we stepped out of the darkness in 2022 and were allowed back out again into a world of hope... or despair?

A comedic dystopia is prominent in Elia’s art. The post-Covid world has transitioned into an unholy marriage between stakeholder capitalism, Chinese style authoritarianism and social justice – the rise of a new power elite. Surveillance, the drive towards a cashless society, the increased obsession with pronouns and gender identity, artificial intelligence, zero carbon directives – after all, Covid-19 lockdowns reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions – Stasi-like snitching and cancel culture, along with the great Amazon takeover, have all become the new normal, turbocharged by Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns.

Miriam Elia’s work is a creative act of defiance against the new normal. She encourages us to look beyond the surface of what seems like harmless, benign acts of kindness, whereby minority views are privileged over majority views, unelected experts have more control than democratically elected governments and climate concerns are prioritised over human needs.

Art thrives on taking risks, pushing against the boundaries of social norms and restrictions. Galleries and museums have become risk-averse and instead have become centres of ‘care’ and ‘safety’, we are now nudged rather than ordered to maintain social distance, to wear a mask, to not pay with cash; trigger warnings dominate all interactions between the visitor and the art. Let’s hope for more artistic dissenters like Miriam.

Curator  
Manick Govinda





*merry pronoun potpourri*  
2022  
illustration from the book  
*We see the sights*

*everything must go*  
2022  
illustration from the book  
*We see the sights*



# Miriam Elia: To Amuse and Enlighten, or the Educational Function of the Joke in Contemporary Art<sup>1</sup>

Upon first viewing Miriam Elia's works, we are left slightly confused, which quickly turns into a feeling of amusement. The small books are passed round as we point out to each other the most poignant jokes, which are a bit absurd, but so close to our reality. This is British humour as if from classic Monty Python sketches. Only somewhere deep down there is a feeling that maybe this is not quite so funny after all.

Miriam Elia is a British artist working in diverse media – the author of short films, animations, book illustrations, radio plays and drawings, to name just a few. Among her works featured in the exhibition *The New Normal* are those published in the books *We do Lockdown* and *We see the sights*, part of a series of art-books released under the Dung Beetle label, modelled on Penguin's cult series of Ladybird books for children, on which generations of British kids grew up. Elia's books present the adventures of three characters: siblings John and Susan, and their mother.



*keep your distance*  
2020  
illustration from the book  
*We do Lockdown*

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of an essay published in the magazine *Obieg*: <https://obieg.pl/en/318-miriam-elia-entertains-and-teaches> (retrieved on 2 January 2023).

Viewers encounter a graphic design similar to the Ladybird originals, also presented as a way of teaching children new words by using them in context. The publications say they are intended for users up to the age of five and are intended to prepare children for functioning in society.

The study of concepts presented in Miriam Elia's books, shown through the distorting mirror of satire on the present, harks back to one of the fundamental changes that took place in 20th-century philosophy. This was the linguistic turn, inspired by such thinkers as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Richard Rorty.<sup>2</sup> Accusing these two philosophers of coming up with a reality-distorting vision would be as simplistic as the allegations Friedrich Nietzsche laid the groundwork for the rise of Nazism. Nonetheless, the strides made by the authors of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* led their successors to negate the existence of objective truth in favour of recognising its consensual nature. Since no objective reality exists, only what is generally agreed to be true is true. Language, as the ultimate criterion, becomes a tool for transforming states of affairs. In this approach, the power to impose specific visions is gained by those subjects that have an appropriate strategy of "selling" their own arguments (or imposing them by force). Consensus becomes a major value, though it requires denying the values upheld by those who may argue a different view. This postulate finds its sociological continuation in the works of Serge Moscovici,<sup>3</sup> as the

<sup>2</sup> Similar conclusions can be found in Krzysztof Karoń, *Historia antykultury. Podstawy wiedzy społecznej. Wersja robocza* (Warsaw, 2018), pp. 458–462.

<sup>3</sup> Notably in *Psychologie des minorités actives* (PUF: Paris, 1979).

French social psychologist noted that minorities have an opportunity to influence the majority because they are better organised (though often underestimated and disregarded by the general public) and their position is more precisely defined.

These references to the linguistic turn and changes in the perception of reality (including the social one) have not remained locked in an academic vacuum. Their influence on the world around us is all too visible, as reflected also in the black humour of Miriam Elia's books. Throughout the 20th century, with a marked acceleration in the 1960s, Western countries went through a re-evaluation of basic social concepts.<sup>4</sup> Instead of "institutional authority" we now have "individual rights", "hierarchy" has been replaced by "equality", family by its various forms, and human life has been nuanced and is slowly being equated with the life of animals and plants.<sup>5</sup> All this has been achieved through clever manipulation within a "consensus culture", which most often turns out to be mere conformism.

Educational reforms have also had a significant impact on these shifts. The crisis of the family being experienced by Western countries is tending to transfer the burden of education to schools, where social-engineering specialists, teaching in accordance with new pedagogical perspectives, whereby the teacher-student hi-

<sup>4</sup> I won't try to identify the causes of the state of affairs described in this essay; perhaps I would have to go back to the French Revolution, or Martin Luther's famous Ninety-Five Theses, or even to the sin of the first parents.

<sup>5</sup> Marguerite A. Peeters, *Globalizacja zachodniej rewolucji kulturowej. Kluczowe pojęcia, mechanizmy działania* [published in English as *The Globalization of the Western Cultural Revolution: Key Concepts, Operational Mechanisms*], translated by Grzegorz Grygiel, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sióstr Loretanek, 2010), p. 42.

erarchy is replaced by horizontal forms, have a growing presence. “Child-friendly schools”<sup>6</sup> promote various forms of “diversity,” including those related to gender identity and sexual orientation, leading to children and adolescents losing a stable psychological ground (leaving them lost in the world, just as the young characters in Miriam Elia’s books are lost in a contemporary art gallery).

In their deconstruction of the old-world order, cultural revolutionaries are gradually reshaping reality through manipulation and influence over ever younger audiences. To this end, it is important to prepare the right ground for the changes to be introduced. In order to propose the “new” more successfully, the foundations of the old order must be weakened accordingly. For this purpose, taunting turns out to be an ideal means. As Chantal Delsol writes in her book *La haine du monde: Totalitarismes et postmodernité*, after the defeat of Nazism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, terror turned out to be a discredited tool for managing the revolution.<sup>7</sup>



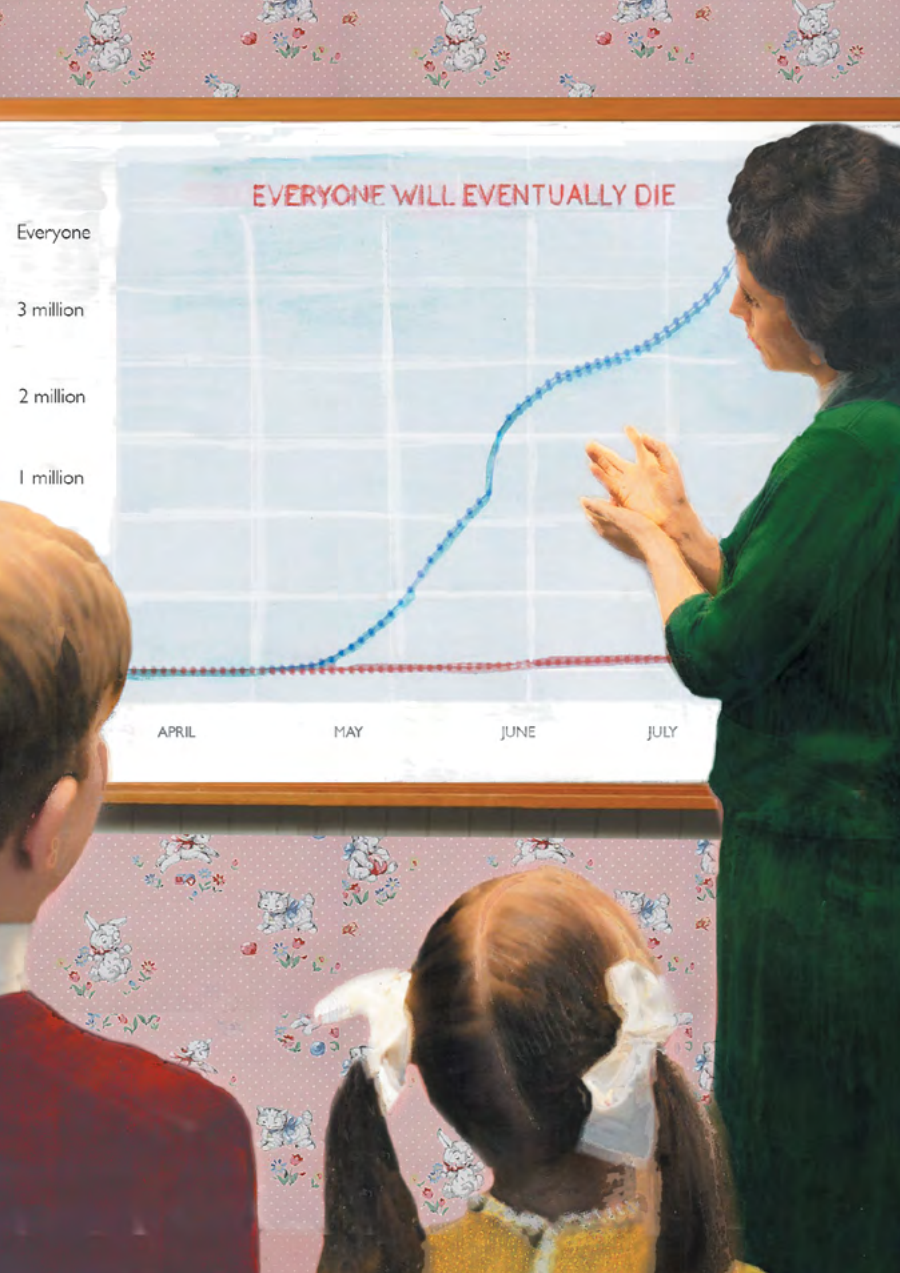
<sup>6</sup> More on this in *ibidem*, pp. 212–214.

<sup>7</sup> Chantal Delsol, *Nienawiść do świata. Totalitaryzmy i ponowoczesność* [originally published as *La haine du monde: totalitarismes et postmodernité*], translated by Marek Chojnacki (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 2017), p. 68.

*love thy neighbour*

2020

illustration from the book  
*We do Lockdown*



*suburban safe space*  
2020  
illustration from the book  
*We do Lockdown*

Ridiculing the opponent proved more effective, all the more so since it is most often dressed up in the hypocritical garb of “freedom of speech.” Here, however, you have to maintain “revolutionary vigilance”, knowing what you can and cannot laugh at. So while the mockery of Christianity may be the flywheel of celebrity careers (as in the case of the artist known as Nergal, leader of the metal band Behemoth), jokes about the LGBTQ+ movement can put you in big trouble, as experienced by the stand-up star Dave Chapelle.

It is often the case that derision causes more effective devastation than terror, because it denies the victim the possibility of heroic martyrdom.<sup>8</sup> Creating a culture requires effort, and Pascal’s “thinking reed” is crushed to dust by the slightest gust of wind. The cackle of revolutionary anti-culture stems from the basest motives and is banally simple. For the young generation, Pope John Paul II is not the author of intellectually stimulating encyclicals, but rather the subject of more or less offensive, mostly absurd, memes.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 73–74.

In this context, Miriam Elia appears as a critic of anti-culture. Using the subversive mechanisms of contemporary art to expose the instrumental treatment of concepts, she ridicules (with her British charm) the absurdities of reality that, in our uncertainty about the power of the mass media, we are afraid to point out. In her case, the irony draws its strength from the freedom that comes from standing up against what mustn't be laughed at: the "new normal", in which yesterday's obviousness becomes obsolete today. Those who do not maintain "revolutionary vigilance" are labelled "tin foil hatters" or "conspiracy theorists", and tarred with the same brush as flat-earthers, yeti seekers, and reptilian believers. This shows the anti-ideological attitude of the Dung Beetle books, because they ridicule what ideology forbids be ridiculed.

The seemingly simple procedure employed by Elia reveals the deeper layers of the culture that surrounds us. The subordination of reality to arbitrarily defined concepts, rooted in an instrumentally used linguistic turn, carries many hidden threats. The artist shows the multitude of situations where, step by step, our freedom is eroded. Perhaps that is why we feel uneasy when we laugh at Miriam's jokes.

Text  
Marcel Skierski



*intangible wish factory*  
2022  
illustration from the book  
*We see the sights*

# Miriam Elia

(b. 1982, London, UK) a visual artist and broadcaster from North London. Her diverse work includes short films, animations, illustrated books, prints, drawings, stand-up comedy and surreal writing for radio.

She is best known for her art book *We go to the gallery*, in which she illustrated the classic Key Words with Peter and Jane Ladybird book characters grappling with conceptual art.

Miriam graduated with a Master's degree from the Royal College of Art in 2006, having completed a BA in graphic design at Brighton. In 2008, she was nominated for a prestigious Sony Award for her debut BBC Radio 4 sketch show, *A Series Of Psychotic Episodes*, a surreal comedy series.

She frequently collaborates in writing with her brother, Ezra Elia, and in 2011, they published *The Diary Of Edward The Hamster*; the story of a philosophical yet deeply troubled hamster living and contemplating the meaning of life from the solitary confines of his cage.

In 2012, Miriam wrote and starred in her own comedy mini-series for Channel 4's *Random Acts*, in the short film strand *Survival*, which tells the story of five different animals living in and handling the circumstances of modern society in contrasting ways. From a bunny claiming benefits and selling 'pure' carrots to get by, to a wealthy hipster fox partying her life away in fashionable Shoreditch, in East London.

Miriam continues to create her "learning scheme" books for her independent publishing press Dung Beetle and is artist-in-residence at *The Critic* magazine.

[www.miriamelia.co.uk](http://www.miriamelia.co.uk)

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**Miriam Elia, *original sin*, 2020.**

**Courtesy of the artist**

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