

Wanda Freely

Author

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Museums closed. Exhibitions cancelled. Jobs lost. These were the times.

Wanda Freely, like everyone else, lived precariously. Wanda was a young artist struggling to make a living in South London. She juggled bouts of poorly paid creative work while balancing more routine, low-level admin jobs. Sometimes she earned enough. Sometimes not. That was before the art world locked down until further notice. Any hope of secure employment – once glimpsed on a distant horizon, though eternally out of reach – had since vanished.

One hot day, Wanda was bored. She drifted through sticky streets, carried along by an ambivalent breeze. She longed to be in a museum, wandering freely among abstractions. At her wits' end, Wanda lit up a cigarette, inhaled deeply and began to daydream: now she moved through a cool, labyrinthine sequence of rooms, shifting with the flow of visitor traffic. Above and all around her, vivid paintings stretched into the distance like unreadable road signs. She passed surrealist landscapes, cubist collages and pop art comic strips, walking further into her imaginary museum.

Wanda reached a new wing. A sign glowed: 'This is Tomorrow'. She walked through the entrance into a vast gallery where she encountered more displays of various collections. It looked, however, more like airport security. Full-body scanners tested temperature, turnstiles limited capacity, floor markings restricted movement, Perspex cases shielded artworks and a countdown timer kept things ticking along. She tried to backtrack around the one-way system, but it was no good. Her time in there was up. She was ushered onwards.

The next display was dominated by enormous, brightly painted murals. Wanda scanned the walls, bold colours and strong contours enveloping her field of vision. She strained to focus on details: instantly recognisable were portraits of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, scenes from Black Lives Matter protests and ruinous imperialist monuments. The room had been freshly sprayed and the air was thick with fumes. Wanda was dizzy. She breathed in deeply to steady herself, then swooned and fainted.

Wanda awoke elsewhere, perplexed by the dimly lit void in which she found herself. No artworks in sight. An invigilator appeared out of nowhere and handed Wanda a special headset. With some reluctance she slipped it on. An explosion of personalised content flashed before her eyes, illuminating the ambient darkness. Had she stepped through the smooth glow of her phone screen into her own social media feeds? It was an algorithm-curated display, sponsored by Facebook. Wanda gawped indifferently, recognising everything, liking some things, challenged by nothing. She wanted more.

Winding corridors led to a sacred-looking hall. Strange things appeared on walls and suggested works of art: timid paintings and lumpy ceramics, botched prints and chintzy quilts. 'Show and Tell: Art made by audiences in lockdown'. It was odd, Wanda thought, that the creative efforts of normal people seem so out of place in public art museums. What would happen, she wondered, if people simply stopped going because they no longer felt represented? Wanda followed this thought until she lost her bearings.

Wanting very much to leave and eat, to find the gift shop, to go home, tired of walking, Wanda finished a cigarette. Her daydream, and the fantasy museum, disappeared with it. After a moment she realised that she was standing outside Tate Modern, and it was reopening for the first time in months. At the entrance she noticed a mass of bodies, who together formed, a large, loud, rocking wall before her. It was not the celebration that she had hoped for, but rather a protest against Tate's plans to cut jobs. It was a shame. Wanda wouldn't let it bother her though – she was just relieved it was open again.

Wanda joined a queue, pulled on her face mask and booked a timed ticket on her phone. She noted the cost was twice as much as her hourly wage, and that she no longer had a wage at all. As she waited, unphased by the protests around her, Wanda closed her eyes and let the daydream's visions reverberate in her mind. Inside the museum, nothing much had changed. And that was fine. There was a Warhol exhibition on. Great.

Andrew Price lives and works in London. He has worked on exhibitions, publications, commissions and live programming for Lisson Gallery, Goldsmiths CCA, Barbican Art Gallery, Tate Modern, Chisenhale Art Place and artists' studios. He has an MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths University and a BA in Culture, Criticism and Curation from Central Saint Martins.