

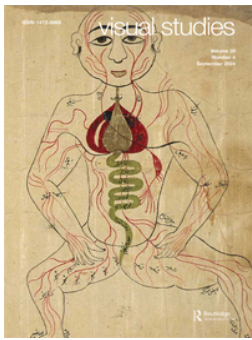
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## VISUAL ESSAY

# Living in post-Brexit Britain during the pandemic: how did it feel for EU citizens?

LUCIA RUGGERONE  AND CHARLIE HACKETT 

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*In the visual essay, we present the images produced by participants during a study on the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic and Brexit on the emotions and feelings of middle-aged European citizens. The study was conducted using an art-based method where participants were asked to produce some form of artwork (a drawing, a collage, a photograph, a video or even a piece of music) and were then interviewed by the researchers. The emphasis was focused on the emotional states experienced by the participants during the lockdowns and in their new citizen status post-Brexit. The visual essay features some of the participants' artwork, representing their feelings and moods during that period and includes extracts from the interviews conducted in the follow-up of the artworks. The images create a gallery, a visual tour of felt emotions, highlighting the singularity of the participants' affective states as well as the condensed meanings of shared symbols they used.*

## INTRODUCTION

The life of many European citizens living in the UK has been marked, in the last few years, by two major events that are producing a noticeable impact on both their public life (i.e. their citizens status) and on their private existence. The results of the 2016 referendum, won by the so called 'Brexiters', transformed their status from cosmopolitan citizens into immigrants, while the spreading of the pandemic in 2020, and the consecutive lockdowns, further limited their freedom of movement and temporarily took away the possibility to travel to

Europe to see friends and family. In this essay, we present the images produced by participants to the study undertaken between October 2021 and June 2022, where we investigated the emotions and feelings experienced by middle-aged EU citizens using an art-based method. Although in the aftermath of the referendum and in the following years, there has been an abundance of research on the post-Brexit effects on this demographic, this study takes a different approach. It specifically focuses on the individuals' inner emotional states as they have been shaped by the double whammy of a diminished civil status and the limitations on public life imposed by the pandemic. Again, differently to other studies, this is not about the EU citizens wellbeing or mental health; rather its aim is to bring to the surface the emotions, feelings and moods that were engendered by these external factors and the ways in which these emotions impacted on their existential experience. When designing our study, we presupposed that the Covid-induced restrictions, put into force between 2020 and 2021, were producing an amplified negative impact on EU citizens because they were already destabilised by Brexit. This view is validated by prior research, carried out in the wake of the 2016 referendum, which clearly demonstrate that EU nationals have become increasingly 'vulnerable' (Benedi Lahuerta and Iusmen 2021; Guma and Jones 2019; Teodorowski et al. 2021; Tyrrell et al. 2019). To better define this vulnerability, we decided to focus on the demographics comprising individuals between 35 and 60 years of age, as they represent a 'sandwich generation' (Chisholm 1999) likely to have attachments and affective bonds both in the UK and in their European home country. In our view, this age group would most acutely feel the frustration and sense of guilt

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deriving from the inability to continue a dual life, taking care of dependents in the UK and attending to older people ‘at home’ (Baldassar and Wilding 2020; Chisholm 1999; DeRigne and Ferrante 2012). We recruited 25 participants based in all 4 UK regions; the majority live in Scotland and England, 1 participant resides in Wales and 1 in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

In the study, we used an art-based method combined with in-depth interviews. For the initial exploration, we asked the participants to produce a piece of artwork expressing the emotions they felt about Brexit and during the lockdown and we then used this as a stimulus or guide for the interviews. This methodological choice is based on the premise that art holds a higher potential for expressiveness than words. When we *speak about* feelings, we use general categories, sets of conceptualizations that encompass different experiences under the same label. On the contrary, when we *express* feelings through art, the particularity of the individual experience is preserved. From a previous qualitative research study by the research team (Ruggerone et al. 2019) we found that asking participants to produce an artwork allows the capture of emotional states and feelings that might not emerge from the interview alone (Pink 2001; Sweetman 2009). In total, 24 of the 25 participants produced a variety of visual material, including collages, drawings, photos, a video, while one person selected a piece of classical music to represent their mood and feelings.

Leaving aside the type of analysis we undertook on the data and the results produced by the investigation (all of which we present and discuss in another text (Ruggerone and Hackett in preparation)), in this visual essay we wish to present some of the artworks produced by our participants with the intention to let them ‘speak for themselves’. By selecting some of the artworks that have most impressed us, we have created a gallery of images where the representation of the participants feelings are displayed directly for the viewers’ interpretation with no other filters than the words the creators themselves used to explain their work. The captions attached to each image are extracts of the interviews which followed the production of and centred on the artwork.

Our main objective in this visual essay is to invite the readers to embark on a visual tour of felt emotions guided by the artists’ own descriptions of what they were trying to express. Indeed, it is our contention that artwork is a more immediate way to express emotions than verbal descriptions: the latter depend on a shared tool (language) which is by nature standardised, while feelings are idiosyncratic and pre-linguistic affects. This is why we propose that emotions and feelings are more

adequately studied using art methods, which are more effective in preserving the originality and individuality of affects than the inevitable glossing summaries produced using common language. By combining, in the following pages, the emotions as visually represented, with the words chosen by each artist to explain their work, we try to show how the image functions as a personal declination (or specification) of the feelings the words can only subsume. Importantly, the titles we have given to each set of images in the gallery are drawn from the words the participants themselves used to describe their feelings and moods, while they were talking to us and explaining their art. In this context, each title (‘love’, ‘being torn’, ‘sadness’) is to be regarded as the tip of an iceberg, a signpost indicating the submerged specificity and complexity of each individual’s feelings, as encapsulated in the artwork.

In the final section, we focus on symbols. Symbols are dispersed across most of the drawings produced by our participants: images of the heart, cracks and ruptures, prisons and cages recur in several pictures. As it becomes apparent from the gallery, though, each symbol is differently contextualised in each of the artworks thereby taking on a more specific, personal meaning. In the last section, we focus on time (or rather time in slow motion) and uncertainty, which have been vividly represented by two of our participants. The changed perception of the passing of hours and days, often in complete solitude, is invoked in the stuck calendar put together by Franco, while the ineluctability of lost time is reflected in Corinne’s bottomless hourglass. Finally, the pervasive uncertainty about the future, all of a sudden turned unpredictable as a consequence of Brexit and Covid, is condensed in Corinne’s drawing of the mythic Damocles’ sword.

## LOVE

**Figure 1.** (Simona, Italian living in England with pre-teen son)

In Simona’s own words: ‘there’s a heart which is my child which is the most important in my life and that I’ve cared for during the pandemic. It was a very hard time with him during the pandemic but still love him very much. So he’s there and this is also a symbol of love. During the pandemic we all discovered something that was precious to us ... in the background you can see the UK flag. For me it’s a very meaningful legacy with the UK. I’m not a British citizen, but it was liberating for me to leave Italy in 2014 after my separation and being able to travel ... once I arrived in (...) I found the place where I want to live. This place has everything that I

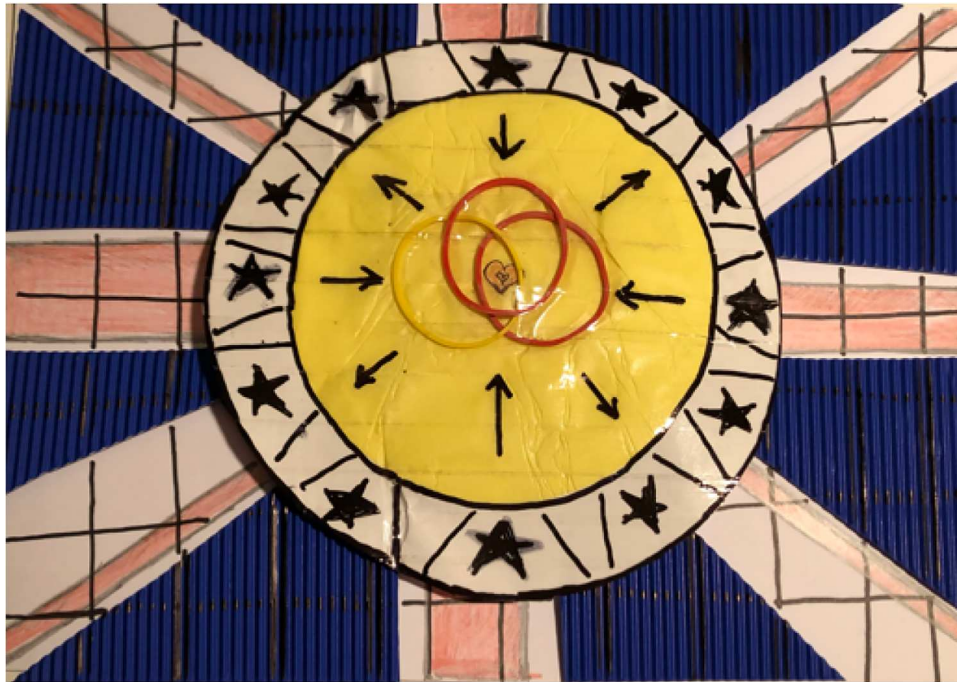


FIGURE 1. Artwork created by Simona

really want. For me the UK is a big, big change. My child was finding his happiness and he was very relaxed here’.

The collage in [Figure 1](#) was composed by an Italian single mother, Simona, based in England at the time of the study. Simona’s situation is very complex: she has been shifting between Italy and the UK in the last few years and actually spent most of the lockdowns in Italy to care for her young child, who was being treated in an Italian hospital. She then came back to a city in the south of England, where she wants to live, at the end of 2021, but until the time of the interview, she still had not been granted the pre-settled status by the Home Office, while her son still remained in Italy with her ex-partner. During the interview she was very open and emotional, as she explained the complex negotiations to obtain the settled status, on one hand, and, on the other, passionately declared her love for the UK and her desire to live here. She described the anxiety experienced when travelling by car from Italy to the UK on her own hoping not to be held at the border and, at the same time, yearning to make things work in England for herself and her son.

[Figure 2](#). (Lisa, Italian living in London with young family)

‘So it was lots of family time, lots of love because we felt like we re-connected and we decided that if times were changing that was maybe a good time to have a second child then I got pregnant. It was quite quick. So hence the heart and my pregnancy, was a girl and I really wanted a girl so that’s why the pink.’

In this art piece love is central, but this time is directed to her home (in London) and her growing family. Lisa, an Italian woman living in London with her partner and two small children, enjoyed this feeling of love and comfort during the first lockdown, when the family was reunited and reconnected more strongly. However, the comforting feeling of love, expressed in the left half of the collage, is offset by the worry and anxiety and guilt she feels for her parents back in Italy, exposed to the danger of Covid in their old age. Lisa says: ‘Then of course [sigh] it was very hard at the same time because I’m Italian so my whole family was in Italy, my parents are 80, ... So, in the right hand side that’s the dark side.. the little man is me and my huge thinking, with an outline drawing of Italy to represent a tear coming from the button eye with flashes of lightning that represent a sense of fear’.

### BEING TORN

[Figure 3](#). (Erika, Danish living in Scotland with grown-up children)

‘I think Brexit is ultimately a lot more profound than the pandemic’. ... I felt very split (after the Brexit vote), I started almost splitting into two halves ... The metallic stuff coming out of the split face represents the huge mess of disbelief and anger and hurt and upset caused by the referendum results ... The broken heart is being held together by a string and a safety pin ... still held together and still beating.’



FIGURE 2. Artwork created by Lisa



FIGURE 3. Artwork created by Erika

Erika mainly wanted to talk about Brexit in the interview and her collage is about how Brexit made her feel. It had the very real effect of making her dissociate from an active political life as she felt it ripped her off of her citizenship in the UK. This situation spurred her to make plans to leave and go back to Denmark, but this decision proved to be a bad one as, she says ‘I could tell how big a difference, my Danishness is quite dated now, because I’ve not lived in Denmark properly since the early 80s so a lot of the ways I think and define myself and think of the Danish society is stuck back then and I don’t like the way that Danish society is moving at the moment ... My Danishness is really increasingly about nostalgia and memories and people I knew from back then and especially some older family members that stayed with us as a child ... it’s not Denmark as such that I miss, it’s something completely on a different level. It’s the things I knew, the things I was attached to as a child I think. I couldn’t think oh I could just go back to Denmark. What would I do? I did it and I hated it, I felt so lost’.

Figure 4. (Sandra, Italian, living in Scotland with two young children)

‘I was already stuck (in Scotland) that was a fact right. I was here and there was this huge blue dark barrier, the yellow ... represents the sea of words and nonsense and confusion and that’s why I scattered letters over it and it’s just I couldn’t get through. ... for the first time since



FIGURE 4. Artwork created by Sandra

I've been living abroad which was, let me think, seven to eight years ... I missed home. I really missed it.'

For Sandra, an Italian single mother living in Scotland, the double whammy of Brexit and Covid caused heartbreak that is painful and impossible to heal. She describes her heart as irremediably split, and her struggle to keep strong for her children and avoid mental distress for their sake. She talks about her fight against difficult circumstances and describes a powerful feeling of negativity emerging from the sense of being stuck away from home (Italy) as well as questioning her status as a citizen.

The two red marks at the sides of the picture are the halves of the heart, and on the left-hand side, in the woman's figure there is 'just a hole where my heart should sit whole. But it's actually been ripped out and half here and half there. ... because it's been pulled out ...'.

### GLOOM, NEGATIVITY

Figure 5. (Marek, from the Czech Republic, living in Scotland with wife and adolescent children)

'There is, you know, plenty of metaphors like the chains ... you know we can't travel, the lockdown, the empty benches ... people are ill or dying you know, the paler light, which is sort of blurry ... the life is gotten gloom and not happy all the time. The perspective for the railing is a point for somewhere, you don't actually know

where it going ... .. after Brexit the atmosphere toward people from European Union was not the best, you know. So, all combined together, the last two years were pretty hard [sounding very upset] and this is maybe why I pulled this picture.'

The beautiful photo above was taken by Marek, a care worker from the Czech Republic living with his wife and two children in Scotland. Because of his frontline job, the pandemic deeply affected Marek, who was responsible for highly vulnerable people in a care-home. The danger posed by the virus and the delay by the UK government to adopt protective measures caused a huge stress for Marek and took a heavy toll on his wellbeing. The exposure to the disease, compounded by the worry for their family in Europe, led to the decision to go back to the Czech Republic. However, on the day of the interview for a good job in Prague, Marek was ill with Covid and had to give it up. Later, the family resolved to remain in the UK, especially, he says, to spare the kids another difficult re-adjustment. The sadness and gloom of this recent past emerges in the photo that Marek (a keen amateur photographer) took on a foggy morning at a site on the Scottish coast.

Figure 6. (Corinne, French, living in Scotland with pre-teen children)

'the headphones they're because I just couldn't stand the world around me anymore. I mean around me, my own voice, my reactions to my sons not wanting to do



FIGURE 5. Photograph taken by Marek



FIGURE 6. Drawing by Corinne

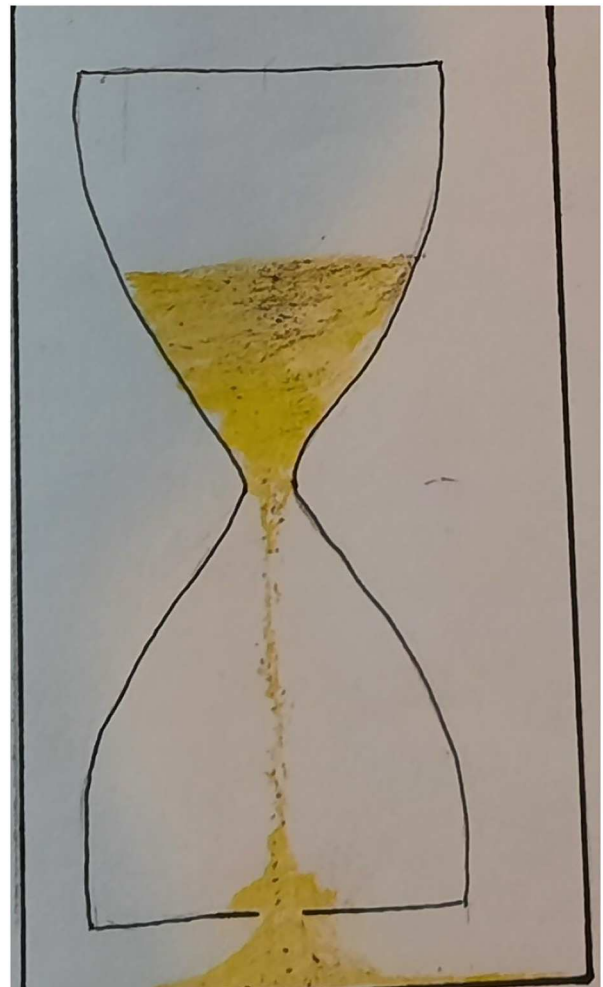


FIGURE 7. Drawing by Corinne



# April 2020

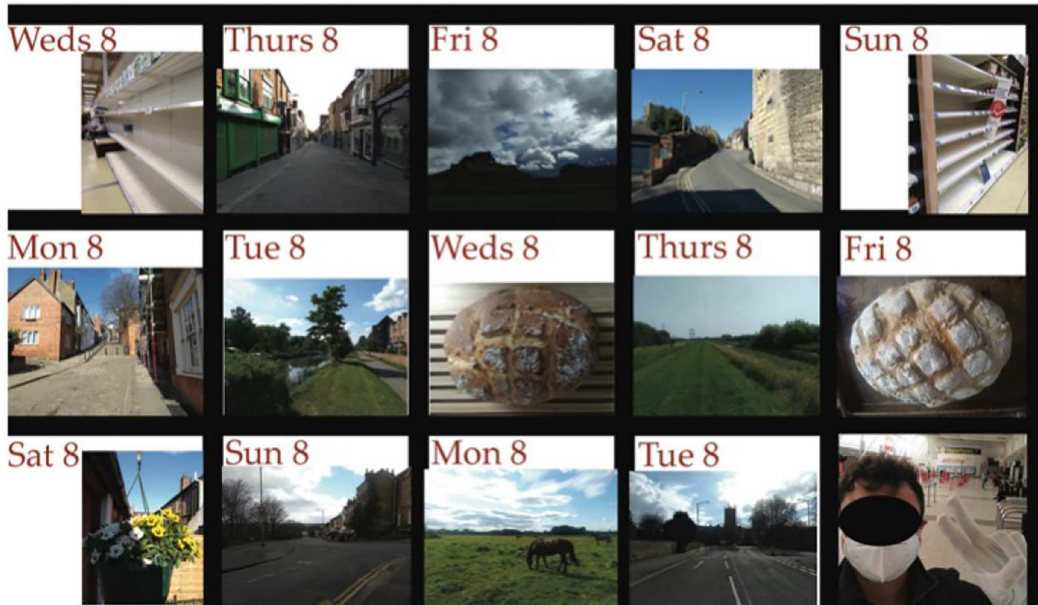


FIGURE 8. Artwork created by Franco



FIGURE 9. Damocles' sword (drawing by Corinne)

schoolwork but being on the screen all the time ... I'm tired of hearing myself telling them that they need to work more, ok they've done a bit but that's not enough. I don't know, I felt like I had nothing, I was struggling to find something nice to say and so that's where this self-hatred as well, because it was also negative that I just didn't like, yeah, the vibes that I was giving, the sound of what I was saying, the tone of voice and I would put those headset on and put my music on and try to feel better with the music or have a good cry with the music.'

The lockdown was a very gloomy period for Corinne, too. She is French and lives in Scotland with her partner and two sons, whom she had to home-school during lockdown. This situation depressed her noticeably and led her to question her ability as a mother, foregrounding a lot of insecurities due to her being a 'foreigner' and not properly understanding the British education system and style.

## THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

Our whole study strives to convey deep-seated feelings and emotions that the participants experienced in the recent past. Although each artwork was a unique piece and expressed a subjective connection with the events and the surrounding atmospheres, some common themes emerged among some of the participants as significant traits of the lockdown, post-Brexit period. They are elements that punctuated their everyday lives or frequently recurred in their thoughts during the long days where social contacts and activities had to be suspended and the world seemed to have stalled. These symbols are directly linked to the emotions and powerfully illustrate the mood the participants were experiencing and the emotions that triggered them. We conclude the essay by pointing to two of these traits, which appear to us as most relevant and for which the participants found meaningful symbols.

### Time

#### Figure 7. Corinne

For Corinne, time was lost during the lockdown: 'time ... It just keeps flowing, no matter what we do ... it's going. So even if it's slow, that's what I mentioned earlier, it's going and never coming back'.

#### Figure 8. Franco (Italian, living with wife in England)

For Franco, 'this Wednesday 8 April, which actually was the worst day in terms of death in the first wave, which is

actually what made me realise that this is not going away anytime soon. It's like if time yes was moving forward because of doing writing, doing a lot of stuff, teaching online and so on ... but then it was not passing in the same way that it used to pass. So time was not progressing in the way it used to progress before'.

## Uncertainty

#### Figure 9. Damocles sword

This symbol appears only in one of the pictures in our study. However, it is a powerful symbol of anxiety and precariousness. It is featured in Corinne's artwork hanging over her family, in France. Damocles' sword is the sense of impending doom, the feeling that something really bad might happen any moment to the person bearing it over their head.

## CONCLUSION

Based on our experience in the EU citizens study described above, the introduction of participant-created drawings and photographs allowed to highlight the more subjective aspects of emotions expressed in a variety of visual forms and to foreground how their translation into language, with the naming of the emotions, produces a 'flattening' effect on the affective flows which is only partially offset by the constant connection to the images. Indeed, we have shown that, while the categorisation and the naming of emotions artificially distil singular elements from an assemblage of affects, images succeed better than words to keep all the affects together by appealing to the viewers pre-linguistic reactions. Indeed, the images are never just the sum of distinctive emotions; instead, they conjure up a mood that the viewers can emotionally tune in with. In the visual essay, we wanted to propose an idea which we develop further in a methodological article: that the study of emotions in the social sciences could greatly benefit from the use of art-based and visual methods. Compared to words, images are much more effective in rendering the complexity and interconnectedness of emotive states, which can hardly be distilled in meaningful narratives. Moreover, visual tools are more effective in conferring agency to the data and consequently, they allow to open the analytical process to recipients in a process where researchers mainly act as conveyors of communications produced (and analysed) by the participants. This way the viewers are left free to relate to the data and to make their own interpretations and judgements.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study was approved by the School of Applied Social Studies Research Ethics Committee at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen (ref. 212204).

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## NOTE

- [1] This sample size was decided based on the funding received and the time available to conduct the research and to analyse the data collected. As this is a qualitative study, the aim was not to form a 'representative' sample of the population investigated. Rather we tried to collect rich and in-depth data.

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