

# What Does the Art World Look Like Now?

BY DODIE KAZANJIAN  
April 27, 2020

UNTIL THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY, the art world was a buzzing hive of global activity, with ever-increasing pressure on artists to produce for an insatiable market. Artists (the worker bees)—along with curators, dealers, and collectors—flew from art fair to art fair, to biennials and gallery and museum openings, yet somehow managed to put in the necessary hours in the studio. Then COVID-19 shut everything down. The future of art and art-making is always hard to predict, but we all sense that, post-corona, it will not be what it has been. There's no telling what art will look like after the coronavirus. Marcel Duchamp's first readymade (a bicycle wheel mounted on a kitchen stool), on the eve of the First World War, made all previous definitions untenable.

We also know that great art has come out of societal catastrophes. Titian's magnificent *Pietà* was one of the last paintings he made before he died of a fever during Venice's plague in 1576. Edvard Munch, who survived the 1918 flu epidemic, painted his indelible *Self-Portrait After the Spanish Flu* a year later. And David Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (Falling Buffalos)* is one of the most haunting visual evocations of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s.

Many artists today, unable to access their studios or even buy supplies, are already experimenting with new materials—or in some cases with whatever is close at hand. Maurizio

Cattelan, at his bungalow in Costa Rica, has been recruiting the abundant local ant population into service by using sugar water, honey, or olive oil to attract them into living drawings. Until recently, the Mexican-born, New York-based artist Aliza Nisenbaum located her subjects in salsa clubs where she would go dancing. Now, "without being able to go to my studio and paint, and without the possibility to paint my subjects from live sittings," she says, "I have found myself turning to drawing with gouache on paper at my kitchen table. In a way, it's been very freeing to go back to a looser style and to go slower."

"In the afternoons, I take a long walk and often during these walks I wonder how people are assembling now?" Nisenbaum continues. "Mostly digitally, and sometimes clapping for care workers in the evening. I wonder how society will emerge after all this is over? How will it shift our obligations to one another? Perhaps once we've slowed down from the frenzied acceleration at which we were moving before coronavirus, we will emerge into a society with new solidarities, new ways of being together, such as the gratitude we are now seeing toward care workers. My hope is that we will reimagine a society with intent for a new sense of the collective to emerge."



*Self-Portrait in Autarky*, 2019 Courtesy of Julie Curtiss

When her children's school closed because of the pandemic, Julie Mehretu cancelled all travel plans, packed up the seven large paintings she'd started last summer in her New York studio and brought them, her two kids, and her former partner Jessica Rankin, to the Catskills artists' residence Denniston Hill, which she started with Rankin and a few other artists. "We're co-quarantining," she says. "I'm painting in the barn, homeschooling the kids, going on lots of hikes, and cooking. This is a space of refuge. The last time I painted here was during 9/11. I work really well up here. There's nothing to stop me. It's rare to have this opportunity, this freedom, this moment in the country. These paintings are getting somewhere."

"Painting in the time of coronavirus is not that different from painting in the time before corona, as far as my practice goes," says Elizabeth Colomba. "The mandatory confinement is not that drastic compared to the isolated life I lead—sad but true!" She continues, speaking from her Harlem apartment, where she is isolating, "but from time to time, it has made me feel useless. The experience is humbling and makes my art seem . . . frivolous. An unnecessary essential. I struggle with that thought. I always did. But is it? I know it is not as important as people who put their lives on the line. But isn't it a contribution to deliver a semblance of beauty in a scorched world?"

I've often dreamed of a world without the internet or the smartphone, a slowed-down, more contemplative place where the constant intrusive pings of incoming texts and emails don't monopolize our time. Now the internet is the world—the virtual has become our reality. Closed galleries have online viewing rooms (artists do, too—Robert Wilson just opened his own), as well as Zoom interviews and studio visits; museums offer new ways to experience their wonders digitally; Sotheby's recently boasted of having its largest online sale ever. And Damien Hirst is doing a series of self-interviews on Instagram, answering questions from his admiring or hostile flock. Alex Israel, whose past projects—*As It Lays*, *SPF-18*, and recent work on Snapchat—were "built to live online," tells me that today he is "processing the news, trying to digest the change, and attempting to keep in tune with the rhythm of a world in flux. Binge-watching so much TV these past few years (and especially these past few weeks), it's hard not to imagine the platform's potential as an outlet for art and as a possible path forward post-pandemic."

"All art before this month was 'pre-internet,' " the British art writer and critic Martin Herbert quipped. "Currently art is 'internet.' When the internet breaks, art will be 'post-internet.' "

One of my last real-life studio visits before the coronavirus shutdown was with Julie Curtiss, who had just finished a very strange painting called *Self-Portrait in Autarky* (i.e., *self-sufficiency*). It showed a young woman, nude, wearing a blindfold and earplugs, crouching in a niche. A couple of weeks later, Curtiss's image suddenly looked prescient, projecting fear, isolation, and vulnerability. "Art can act as a mirror, as a window, and at times as a crystal ball," Curtiss says when I reach her by email in Paris. Before, she says, isolation "was about re-centering and connecting with yourself—but now you can't escape yourself."

She adds: "I thought this confinement would be a good occasion for diving deep into a production phase. And at first, despite the uncertainty, it was paradoxically peaceful and delightful not to be pressed by time and obligations. It's almost as if we had to learn how to just 'be' again. What I had underestimated is my need for external stimuli, how much I feed off the surrounding energy, pack it up and bring it to the studio to process. The thing I'm missing the most is the unexpected, a breath of oxygen."

WE INVITED EIGHT ARTISTS to come up with self-images that reflect their own states of mind at a time when physical distancing has become a way of life. Cindy Sherman went deep, with a close-up, double image of her face—long, aristocratic nose pressed against the camera lens. It could have been painted by Lucas Cranach in the 16th century, but she made it on her iPhone: an Old Master selfie. Sherman's subject has always been role-playing, but here she's performing herself. It's weird and startling and profoundly haunting—and, once again, proves she's no coward. "Have no idea what it means," she tells me. "I suppose it'll be 'untitled,' like everything else of mine."

Elizabeth Peyton gives us a pastel self-portrait with her dog, Isolde. "It's very much in her spirit—she reminds me how magical nature is. As the drawing was coming along, I was thinking, 'Where are these colors coming from?' Ah, it's from the sunrises I've been looking at." As usual, Peyton manages to suggest worlds with her sinuous and seductive line. "Since the pandemic, working feels different—slow, like I'm working in glue, sometimes. There is the suffering going on from the virus, and then this disease heading the federal government with no compassion, making the virus worse! It's bewildering, a lot to take in. . . . A good time for beauty."

Maurizio Cattelan gives us something dark and scary, but not without a touch of humor—a portrait of himself as a black-hooded

executioner. The title is *Good Night*. "This is a selfie, but you don't even see the face," he tells me—a macabre comment on a macabre time. (Cattelan made sport of the art market last December by taping a real banana to the wall at the Miami Basel art fair, ultimately pricing it at \$150K. The edition of three sold out before the booth opened.)

For many artists, there is a deep discomfort involved in making art in a crisis. "Right now, this week, this hour, I'm nervous and emotional and unsure," says Shara Hughes, whose image for our portfolio is a jagged mix of portrait, landscape, and abstraction. "There's what's happening inside the 'head shape' and what's happening outside. It all fits together, but everything is tight and fighting for its voice," she says. "I don't know how to organize myself in this very uneasy time. I've been doing a lot of puzzles and no art. I keep telling myself to make something, but I don't know how, and each day I say, 'Today I will start.' But I just don't. I think my portrait reflects something almost like tectonic plates within my own isolated body, rubbing up against each other, agitated and caged."



*Untitled, 2020* Courtesy of Cindy Sherman

Tschabalala Self often uses stitched-together fabric scraps to make her large-scale figurative collage paintings. Her image here, *Self-Portrait in Homemade Mask*, is a polaroid diptych and shows her in her New Haven studio. She made her stylish mask from blue jean fabric, cutting holes for her ears. She is warily alert and mysteriously beautiful. "It's been humbling to have everything in my life change so quickly because of circumstances outside of my control," she says. "I have had this experience before, but never shared with so many others at once. The virus has caused me to see myself as part of a whole, as opposed to an individual. It has shown me how interdependent we all are."

Some artists simply ignore global crises. During the Second World War, Giorgio Morandi stayed in his cramped Via Fondazza studio in Bologna and kept right on painting his quiet, profound images of bottles, pitchers, and ceramic vessels. As the Italian art critic Giuseppe Marchiori wrote, "Amid the clamor of war his silent and lonely steadfastness was a bulwark; it was a noble protest of the man 'the most out of step' in the world." George Condo, whose "Drawings for Distanced Figures" opened at Hauser & Wirth's online exhibition this month, tells me, "I'm trying not to watch the news. It makes it all too 'in the room' instead of out there around us. The real war is going on in the hospitals and in the governments. Artists can only do what they do."

Even if artists do not directly engage with the virus, they are likely to be affected. "I was reminded of how many great writers, intellectuals, and artists emerged in Italy—and in Europe—after the Second World War," says Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of both the New Museum in New York City and the Trussardi Foundation in Milan, which has invited artists to create "Chamber Journeys" depicting their domestic spaces. "Those months and years of 'home schooling' and forced isolation meant that thousands of young adults had to find new ways to spend their time." Gioni and his wife, Cecilia Alemani (artistic director of the next Venice Biennale and chief curator of art on the High Line), have a four-year-old son, whose young life has been disrupted by social distancing. "I just hope that the 'little holidays,' as the Italian writer Alberto Arbasino ironically described the war years, we have all been quarantined into these past months will bring new generations of artists and writers," Gioni says. "Perhaps that's a meager consolation, but certainly an endearing one. It might be bittersweet to think back on this time as a little holiday rather than a planetary tragedy."

Nicolas Party, the Swiss-born artist known for monumentally playful sculptures and magical, surreal paintings in soft pastel,



*Portrait and Cave*, 2020 Courtesy of Nicholas Party

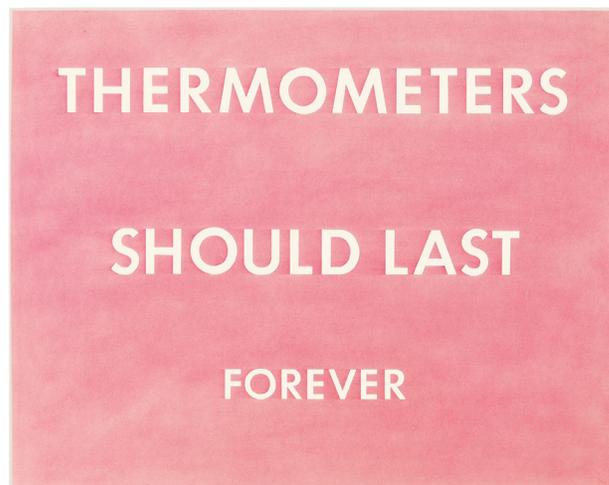
been so few female artists. Historically, they were either wealthy, single, or without children, or all three. I just can't concentrate enough, even on returning texts! But I have made an amazing assortment of dishes." She lists 20, among them "black peppered pan-seared duck breasts au jus, sweet potatoes, and green beans"; "homemade Marcella Hazan Bolognese, spinach lasagna, and kale Caesar salad"; "my mom's matzo-ball chicken noodle soup"; and "beer-battered deep-fried halibut fish tacos with guacamole, rice, and beans."

"I wish I'd taken a picture of each of these concoctions and sent it in to you as a collage for what I've been doing in isolation. And the piles of laundry!!" What a collage that would have been.

has been thinking of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, he tells me. "When Chihiro enters a new world, she starts to become transparent. What an interesting vision she is having, seeing through her arm and witnessing her body becoming immaterial." In a new work, a self-portrait titled *Portrait and Cave*, the androgynous figure is translucent as well; we look into and through this face, and sense the underlying anxiety. We may be back to the birth of art, in Paleolithic caves. Or could it be a re-birth?

And then there's Ed Ruscha, the Los Angeles-based master of word images. Asked to contribute a self-portrait reflecting his current state of mind, he reached back four decades and selected a lusciously pink pastel drawing from his archives with the words "thermometers should last forever": a conceptual ready-made chosen by an artist who has no peer at taking the temperature of particular moments. When asked how this represented his state of mind today, Ruscha said, "It's mercury in a tube. Shouldn't it last throughout eternity?" (Ed's thermometer will forever be mercury, even though mercury thermometers were sent packing in 2012.)

There's another artist whose work didn't make it into this portfolio. "I know today is the last day to get my image to you," Rachel Feinstein, artist and mother of three children, emails me. (Her husband is the artist John Currin.) "But truthfully, I haven't had a moment to think about making anything art-related. There's a reason why there have



*Thermometers Should Last Forever*, 1976 Courtesy of Ed Ruscha