

The Art Market Adjusts: Artists interacting in new ways

10 APRIL 2020

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Social distancing has impacted all facets of the art industry, and the primary art market has not been immune. As our team continues to engage in these Q&As, a question that often arises is – How are artists doing? Some artists are using this time to reset, and others are coming together to cope. This is a time when many of us are in search of artistic inspiration to lift our spirits and help us process our current situation. Perhaps a silver lining is that we might witness some extraordinary art at the end of this, as the pandemic might present unexpected opportunities for artists to engage their creativity. To stay connected with the public and art collectors, some artists have turned to social media and virtual visits set-up through their galleries. In the last few weeks, museums and galleries have worked hard to bring art into our homes and provide us with ways to connect with artists online.

In the Q&A, my colleague Amanda Rottermund speaks to Sarah Calodney, Director at Lehmann Maupin, about gallery relationships with artists around the world and the tools artists are using to engage with collectors and the artist community.

Diana Wierbicki
Global Head of Art Law

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Amanda: Sarah, you travel frequently to meet with artists and clients you work with, so this quarantine must be so unusual for you – how have you been connecting with them from your base in Dallas?

Sarah: I think the art world is built on personal relationships. Prior to this pandemic, in-person visits were the most meaningful way to connect with both collectors and artists. Showing up for a viewing or studio visit was literally half the battle. That of course has completely changed now. There are less connections expected of you but it's been tough figuring out the right balance between checking in and giving everyone the mental space to adjust and cope. I have really enjoyed FaceTime calls with the artists I work with or sending encouraging texts back and forth. Artists really think about the world in such unique ways, so I love having their perspective during this time.

With clients, aside from checking in to see if everyone is safe and healthy, it's more on a "they come to you" basis. I think it's a great time for collectors to appreciate what they have already in their collection. So, I've been sending "hand typed" messages to clients updating them on artists they've collected over the years with recent news that may or may not have seen. It's not often you get the time to read all of the articles and books published about your artists. Now we have the gift of time. So it's a moment to find a new way of viewing that painting you acquired from me three years ago, or to open that catalogue sitting on your coffee table that you received from me as a holiday gift last year. It's been nice actually connecting with a few on a more personal level than usual actually over email, text and even (gasps)...on old-fashioned phone calls. It's always casual and no pressure. It's surprising how much business has been getting done this way. I had to arrange my first virtual viewing this morning and I can see that becoming more common as we bridge the gap! So even though I'm physically in Dallas, I'm working to find connections on all levels.

Amanda: When we chatted last weekend, you mentioned Liza Lou had invited the public into her studio for a virtual studio visit. Is that something she had ever done before or was it directly correlated to the quarantine?

Sarah: It was a direct result of the quarantine. A lot of artists are doing virtual visits via their galleries or the Council at the New Museum and I know they are organizing a few virtual visits for members. But, for Liza's, it's open to the public which is really a beautiful thing. She created a website www.apartogether.com and an Instagram handle @apartogether_art for the project. You just need an Instagram account and you can log in. She is doing these studio visits weekly, inviting the public to sew with her, which is the main form of her practice.

Amanda: With so much more time for people to slow down and reflect, how do you think this global reset will affect artists you are working with? Are they taking this opportunity to dig deeper and find more space to create?

Sarah: I think artists are naturally isolated or at least our romantic notions of the artist in the studio alone working tirelessly late into the night conjures up those associations. In recent times artists have come away from that into more collaborative art making processes, whether its studios with a multitude of assistants or artists engaging with the public through performance work. There are many artists who are actually relishing this time to go back to the basics and be alone in their studio. We've personally had several artists respond that way and I think there will be some really important works made during this time of crisis. Angel Otero is one example of an artist who has been working tirelessly day and night on a new body of work that is unbelievable. He's been texting me a few photos and I can tell he is really driven from a visceral reaction to the state of the world. I can't wait to hopefully show it in real life.

After all, art is an essential element of human nature and it allows us to see the world in new ways never thought possible. Think about the great German artists and art that emerged in the post- World War II trauma. Gerhard Richter's blurred black and white paintings, including my favorite work of art of all time, the Baader-Meinhof cycle, which was a direct result of the after effects of war. Or Kiefer's heavy and awe encompassing paintings which were literally built up from the ruins of war. If you wanted a more direct correlation, there were huge advancements made in art as a result of the bubonic plague. I think Da Vinci designed a whole city then. Of course, every artist is responding differently. Some artists are taking a step back from producing, or experiencing severe anxiety and not engaging, which is totally fine too. Not every artist needs to "produce" great work right now and they shouldn't feel any pressure to do that.

Amanda: You work with artists who live all over the world. Do you see any cultural differences in how artists are processing and working under the effects of the global pandemic? Have you seen any artists coming together to cope with the effects in dialogue with one another?

Sarah: It seems like our artists based in China (like Liu Wei) and Korea (such as Lee Bul) are already back to work as normal. Though, I think the response is less culturally motivated and more related to the art they make. For example Liza Lou's work has always had a community aspect to the practice helping those most in need, so it makes sense that her work now would be about community outreach during the COVID reality we all face. She's invited the public to make a comfort blanket with her. Depression and isolation are very scary and real side effects of this pandemic and Liza is interested in addressing that and channeling that emotion and energy in an uplifting way. The simple act of making art is restorative. It's been proven to help people coping with depression or drug addiction, just ask Hunter Biden or Vincent van Gogh.

And to use her as an example for the last question, Liza Lou has been inviting artists to join in on the community project and hosting joint virtual studio visits with them. Last week she hosted a studio visit with Shanique Smith, a fellow LA artist. Each one was trapped in their physical studio but connected galactically to us via their shared Instagram screen. I also think that it's important to mention the collaborative aid efforts being put together for artists. I'm not so well versed here but I saw today several important philanthropists have banded together to support artists with monthly stipends to weather the temporary economic effects at www.artistrelief.org. I hope that more collaboration like this happens because we need art now more than ever!

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