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Will the Art World Ever Be the Same? A Brief Oral History of a Tumultuous Year

From the coronavirus to Black Lives Matter protests, the first half of 2020 shocked and shook the art world. Prominent artists, dealers, collectors and executives discuss what happened and what the future might hold.



From left: Artist Deborah Roberts, Sotheby's CEO Charles Stewart, gallerist Larry Gagosian, collector Pamela Joyner, and chairman of Sotheby's fine art division Amy Cappellazzo.

PHOTO: JOANNA NEBORSKY

By [Kelly Crow](#)

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One morning this spring, amid pandemic and protest, artist Eric Fischl looked up at the sky and saw only blue. The jet-plane contrails of engine exhaust that typically striate the atmosphere above his home near Sag Harbor, New York, were gone. He wondered: “Will people want to go back to the smog?”

Society has long looked to artists to be our oracles, to see and shape the tumult of history into forms that make poignant sense in hindsight. A little over halfway through 2020, few expect anything to go back to exactly how it was before.

As the Covid-19 coronavirus began its creep across the planet, and, on Memorial Day, when George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis policeman, people with broken spirits and clenched fists took to the streets to protest police brutality and systemic racism.

In the art world, artists, but also dealers, auctioneers, collectors and curators are figuring out how to make sense of—and move forward from—all that has happened. From David Zwirner to Larry Gagosian, Amy Cappellazzo to Ann Temkin, Pamela Joyner to Gael Neeson, Deborah Roberts to Christina Quarles, major art-world players talk about what happened, and how the art establishment could forever change as a result.

‘OCEANS NO LONGER SEPARATE US’: The Art World’s First Contact With the Virus

On December 31, the World Health Organization was informed of the novel coronavirus now known as Covid-19. For a while, art world dinners, galas and openings mostly continued unabated. By February, the mood had begun to darken.

Patti Wong (chairman, Sotheby’s Asia): In Asia we were a little bit ahead of everyone. Before I left Hong Kong on January 22 to help with our London sales, I asked our office to stock up on masks and hand sanitizer. But when I got to London, my colleagues did not seem worried at all. From there I went to L.A., Geneva, many places. I thought it was weird that Asians were freaking out, but the rest of the world wasn’t really accepting it. On my flight to Los Angeles, my friend and I were the only ones wearing masks. Everyone else was hugging like normal.

“We saw it coming, but oddly the rest of the world didn’t do anything until it was in front of their eyes, and by that time, there was nothing anyone could do.”

— Patti Wong, chairman, Sotheby’s Asia

David Zwirner (dealer): I was tuned out to the news cycle over the holiday, but as soon as we came back [to New York City] in the new year, the virus was right in front of us and we had to close our Hong Kong gallery. We can blame our politicians, but I had my own chance to think ahead, and I did not.

Amy Cappellazzo (chairman, Sotheby’s fine art division): When I realized that people who had gone home to China for their New Year’s holiday might not be able to come back, it hit me that this was a big deal. Oceans no longer separate us in any way.

Ann Temkin (chief curator, painting and sculpture, New York's Museum of Modern Art): The whole month of February, we had had couriers from Italy, Germany, Switzerland and elsewhere all coming in to deliver works for our Donald Judd exhibition. Our art handlers and conservators were wearing masks to protect Judd's work, but we were also starting to read about potential shortages of masks within U.S. hospitals. We had masks on our minds.

Maria Bell (collector): We had a going-away dinner in L.A. for Bettina Korek, who is now CEO of Serpentine Galleries. Some of our Chinese friends at that dinner said, "You know, it's going to come here. You better stock up on toilet paper." Everyone at the dinner was initially like, "C'mon." I'm sure every person left that dinner and went straight to [Costco](#) and bought everything.



COLLAGE CRAFT Highbrow, 2018, by Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Private Collection.

Deborah Roberts (artist): I was in Austin working on my first major solo show for a Texas museum, the Contemporary Austin. I was going to travel, go to Africa and do a lot of stuff this year once I put this show to bed—and then the pandemic hit. I started getting up at 5:30 in the morning, going five miles over to my studio and working till around 10 a.m.; then I would scoot back home so I wouldn't get stopped by the police, questioning me. That's the last thing you want.

Wong: When I got back to Hong Kong, my husband, daughter and I self-quarantined in three different places for a few weeks more until we knew we were safe. In the office, we split into Team A and Team B to make sure people worked separately. If any of our colleagues found out that someone in their apartment building was sick, they weren't even allowed to come to work. We saw it coming, but oddly the rest of the world didn't do anything until it was in front of their eyes, and by that time, there was nothing anyone could do.

The first fortnight of March was a big one for the New York art-world elite—the openings of the Armory Show and a number of major museum and gallery shows, including

exhibitions at the MoMA and the Met Breuer. Unease mounted: Symposiums began to get canceled and crowded dinners became akin to, as dealer Larry Gagosian put it, the Last Supper.

Zwirner: The first week of March was the Armory Show in New York, and it's a big week to socialize. The Gerhard Richter show also opened at the Met Breuer, and my wife, Monica, and I were like, "Let's not get too close to anybody here tonight. Let's not shake any hands." I'm sure I shook a few hands.

Larry Gagosian (dealer): We did a really powerful show of Donald Judd's work that week in our [West 21st Street] gallery space, and we had a dinner there. We put up a really long table for around 70 people facing this one Judd sculpture. We got a great turnout for the dinner—but, when I look back, I see the Last Supper.

Pamela Joyner (collector): The first week of March, I went to the dinner that week for the Mary Lovelace O'Neal show at Mnuchin gallery. I sat next to the artist David Driskell. He died a few weeks later from Covid, and I wish I'd asked him more questions because his knowledge about African-American art was pivotal to the field. I feel like a treasure got snatched away.

Temkin: On Monday, March 9, our Judd show had been open to the public at MoMA for a week. Rainer Judd, the artist's daughter, called because we had a symposium scheduled for Friday, and she asked if we were having any concerns about having the symposium. We weren't even definitely afraid of gathering hundreds of people then. We were debating it, and that's pretty shocking.

Cappellazzo: I took my last business trip to London and had dinner on March 10 with Sotheby's owner, Patrick Drahi. We were scheduled to meet at a restaurant, and at the last minute he changed plans and asked me to meet him at his apartment instead. "I'm just going to get takeout," he said. That was a moment where I was very aware that eating out was suddenly questionable. The next day, I could feel everyone on my plane was anxious to get back to America, to get home.

“The things that don't work well in this country, when the pandemic hit, they just erupted. It really laid bare issues of advocacy and basic human dignity.”

— Deana Haggag, president and CEO, United States Artists, an arts funding organization.

Charles Stewart (chief executive officer, Sotheby's): We sent almost everybody home on March 13 but decided to go ahead with a modern and contemporary South Asian sale on the morning of March 16. I went into the saleroom on the seventh floor. There were very few people in the room, just a skeleton crew, yet we sold over 90 percent of the lots. It wasn't a huge auction, around \$5 million, but it made just above its

high estimate. The seeds of the future were present that day even as the curtains were lowering on the world as we knew it. After that sale, we ordered a bunch of laptops.

By mid-March, major exhibitions were closing or getting canceled en masse. A number of people in and around the art community were affected by the virus, which some compared to the AIDS virus that ravaged, among other communities, the New York City arts community in the 1980s.

Sheena Wagstaff (co-curator, the Met Breuer's Gerhard Richter show): Within a week of our opening, I knew the shutters were coming down. What I didn't anticipate was how long the museum would remain closed. Gerhard is 88 years old, and he's pretty phlegmatic, but he felt deeply about this show. It is desperately sad that it only had a brief moment in the sun.



BENT OUT OF SHAPE Can Yew Feel? Tha Days Are Gettin' Shorter, 2018, by Christina Quarles. Courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London.

Christina Quarles (artist): I was supposed to open my first U.S. solo show, and my largest exhibition, at the MCA in Chicago, on April 4. That date is also my wife's birthday, and I remember feeling badly because I was stealing her birthday. On March 13, I shipped two new paintings to Chicago, but by then my family wasn't even sure they could go because they were worried. We later postponed the show by a year. I'm sure a lot of my anxiety is in those two paintings.

Gagosian: I had a lot of friends who were in the hospital. One of my friends lost both her parents to the virus within a week of each other. I thought, "This shit is for real." I started reading the obituaries, and suddenly most said people were dying of coronavirus. It reminded me of the AIDS epidemic because when that terrible virus exploded a lot of people were dying then of the same thing, too.

‘IT MUST BE PRETTY BAD IF YOU’RE CALLING ME’: In the Thick of the Pandemic

By March 26, unemployment was skyrocketing, and the U.S. led the world in confirmed Covid-19 cases. The art world, mostly sheltering in place, pivoted online. Relief funds were set up. Programming, sometimes as far away as 2024, was reassessed.

Deana Haggag (president and CEO, United States Artists, an arts funding organization): We were watching the cultural sectors get decimated instantly, like performance, and that led to the creation of our Artist Relief fund. In the first 24 hours, we got 25,000 applications. Each week, we’re giving at least 100 artists unrestricted \$5,000 nontaxed grants that they can use to pay their rent, take care of their kids, buy medicine, whatever. About 20 percent of our grantees are visual artists.

Zwirner: In those first few weeks, any other form of outreach could be turned against you. You would call a client, and they would say, “Oh, David, it must be pretty bad if you’re calling me.” The art world felt frozen, and then the stock market tanked. We realized that if we could turn the tables and present interesting art to our clients online then they would come back to us and ask questions.

Temkin: All my meetings with museum colleagues were just scrambling to recalibrate the calendar for the next three or four years knowing that the financial implications for this would be grave.

Victoria Siddall (global director, Frieze Art Fair): We started having conversations about the New York edition of the fair in May. Chinese galleries were dropping out because of the travel ban, and then Italy dropped and we just realized it was going to be impossible to do it.

Joyner: We had a lot of work—about 75 pieces—out on loan around the world that was kind of stuck, from Miami to South Africa.

Gagosian: All those things you take for granted when you’re an art dealer became very, very challenging. But we kept busy, just thinking online, online, online.

Shifting to an online-only business model provided some surprises, like new types of buyers and an unforeseen interest in virtual art tours and obscure online art discussions.

Cappellazzo: Our industry finally has had the digital disruption that I have been advocating for years. Just about every sale we held online during those first three months had about 30 percent new clients bidding, and that wasn’t just for groovy contemporary stuff. Who is coming new to collecting and wants to buy a Renoir drawing online? You assume that category has an aging client base, but it has new buyers. Our wonderful little ecosystem of the art world keeps getting bigger and bigger. People want in. When something is wonderful and special and bespoke, it feels like a club and people still want to be a part of it.

Maria Baibakova (collector): I was surprised at how enriching the digital sphere was for me. I went on virtual studio tours with the Artemis Council of the New Museum, and I found it incredible because I couldn’t have made it to all these studios around the world

without going digital. I'd never been to Pipilotti Rist's studio in Zurich, and at one point in her virtual tour, she asked all of us on the call to draw a self-portrait, photograph it and send it to her. My son's Crayons were nearby, so I just grabbed one. It only took 40 seconds, but it gave us a real connection with her. It was a moment of magic.

Temkin: Of course there is no substitute for being together in the museum or together with the art, but clearly there is an appetite from people around the world to participate in our programming another way.

Alex Nyerges (director and CEO, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts): We hosted a virtual discussion of our exhibition *Treasures of Ancient Egypt: Sunken Cities*, on Ancient Egypt, and more than 1,000 people logged on and we got over 200 questions. Half the people had never even attended our museum.

In April and May, as the severity and longevity of the virus psychologically set in, a number of artists and collectors turned inward, reflecting on new, hard truths. In certain parts of the country, it seemed life might be getting back to a version of normalcy.

Quarles: The day my Chicago show was supposed to open, I made a birthday cake for my wife. I feel like I'm relearning how to be a human being, because the last several years have been so crazy. It's helpful to remember the small moments that make a life good.

Gary Tinterow (director, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston): We realized we had what we needed to reopen on Wednesday, May 20, to our members. I was afraid an anti-masker [might] try to make a scene or that people might be offended at having their temperatures scanned, but after I opened the door, I saw that everyone behaved perfectly. I saw several people cry because they were so elated just to be back in their museum. By Saturday, May 23, we had opened to the public.



STEPS TOWARDS JUSTICE Antiracist demonstrators on the steps of New York City's Tweed Courthouse in June, while wearing masks to help prevent spread of the coronavirus.

'I CAN'T BREATHE': Protests Break Out and the Meaning of Art Is Scrutinized

On May 25, a policeman killed George Floyd in Minneapolis. All over the country protests arose. The virus lingered.

Roberts: I couldn't watch the video, but I saw stills. A black man had died crying out for his mother. We all have mothers. We have been quarantined for months. Our busy former lives didn't get in the way, so we actually saw—and what we saw was so wrong.

Quarles: George Floyd's murder really took a toll on me, and it made it hard for me to justify making art for the first time in my life. I've never had that happen before. We have all been in quarantine for months, and it's really given us these months to see fissures and cracks and shortcomings in our communities and industries. I feel like what this moment with George Floyd is really asking us is, Who will we become when we get out of this?

Haggag: The things that don't work well in this country, when the pandemic hit, they just erupted. It really laid bare issues of advocacy and basic human dignity. There has to be a better system.

Artists and curators also began to wonder about the extent to which art might make a difference and whether it could be its own form of protest.

Roberts: I talked my sister and my niece out of protesting because they live with my 89-year-old mom, and it's just too much, the chances of our bringing Covid back to the house. Instead of using my body to march, I'm using my voice, my art, to talk about activism and relevance. I don't know why my new paintings are coming out big, but they are. We are human. Maybe I've been skirting around the edges and giving my take to people very lightly, but now maybe it's time I punch it in a little bit.

Wagstaff: I joined in these recent protests and think you can make an analogy between the need for an encounter with an object and the need to go out on the streets—both of them are tangible experiences. Both involve our own bodies. Marching is the means by which we can make manifest how we feel, collecting our own bodies into a powerful mass. That has a relationship to our collective need for objects to be witnesses to history.

Quarles: Quarantine has really shown me that you need to have certain needs met in order to make art. Art objects themselves are resilient, and artists are resourceful, but I still think you need to have certain survival needs met in order to reach your full creative potential—food, shelter, health and a sense of safety for yourself and your loved ones.

Joyner: The bright spot is I don't remember a time in the last few years when I felt so hopeful. Look at the makeup of the protesters: There's so much diversity. I can promise you that did not happen in previous generations. Our society just isn't interested in tolerating racism anymore, and I find that really encouraging.

'TWO FUTURES': What's Ahead for the Art World

In late May and into June, dealers and specialists began to question whether the art world could continue under the circumstances of lockdown and working from home.

Zwirner: There are two futures, right? In the next year, if we don't have a vaccine, the disease will still be around. It's getting under control in some countries and going out of

control in others. I just can't see the fairs functioning if travel is hard and people don't feel safe.

Cappellazzo: Eventually, people will want to see live sales again because that theater helps us understand how the market is responding. When you're looking at a painting that could be worth \$9 million or \$12 million, people will still want to watch the competitive bidding for themselves.

“We will always want to stand in front of art and be confronted by greatness.”

— Gael Neeson, collector

Gael Neeson (collector): When you stand in front of an artwork, you think, That's it, I've got to have it. We will always want to stand in front of art and be confronted by greatness. We want to see it and smell it and have it change us.

Temkin: It starts to feel for some people like a real case of art starvation. After this, none of us will be able to take for granted the ability to see works of art every day.

With no clear end in sight, a number of new ideas have come to the fore as potential ways forward, perhaps forever shifting the status quo of the art-world establishment.

Temkin: Museums everywhere will be paying more attention to the programming of works in their collections and placing less emphasis on getting loan exhibitions. All of us curators already felt that the pendulum had swung way too far in the direction of these big loan shows in terms of budget and staff time, and it's really time to adjust the attention paid to our own holdings.

J. Tomilson Hill (collector): Museums can also create accessibility. At the Hirshhorn, Doug Aitken once put his video screens all the way around the building, and anyone could see it. I realize there are lots of regulations to navigate, but you could think of something similar, use the architecture as a platform, at a museum like the Guggenheim, so easily. No one would have to pay or go inside. The High Line is also filled with art, including a new Jordan Casteel mural.

Bell: One thing I know for sure is that the art that we will see coming out of this will be very interesting. Artists who have assistants or make large-scale works are taking long walks and thinking, and artists who paint or work in ceramics—I know they're working during all this, and I know that's an outlet.

Fischl (artist): I am trying to find ways of marking this moment for myself and the times. When we're out of it and when the next generation looks back, something I've done might be one of the things we'll be able to point to and say, “Look at how we were back then, the craziness we lived through.”

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