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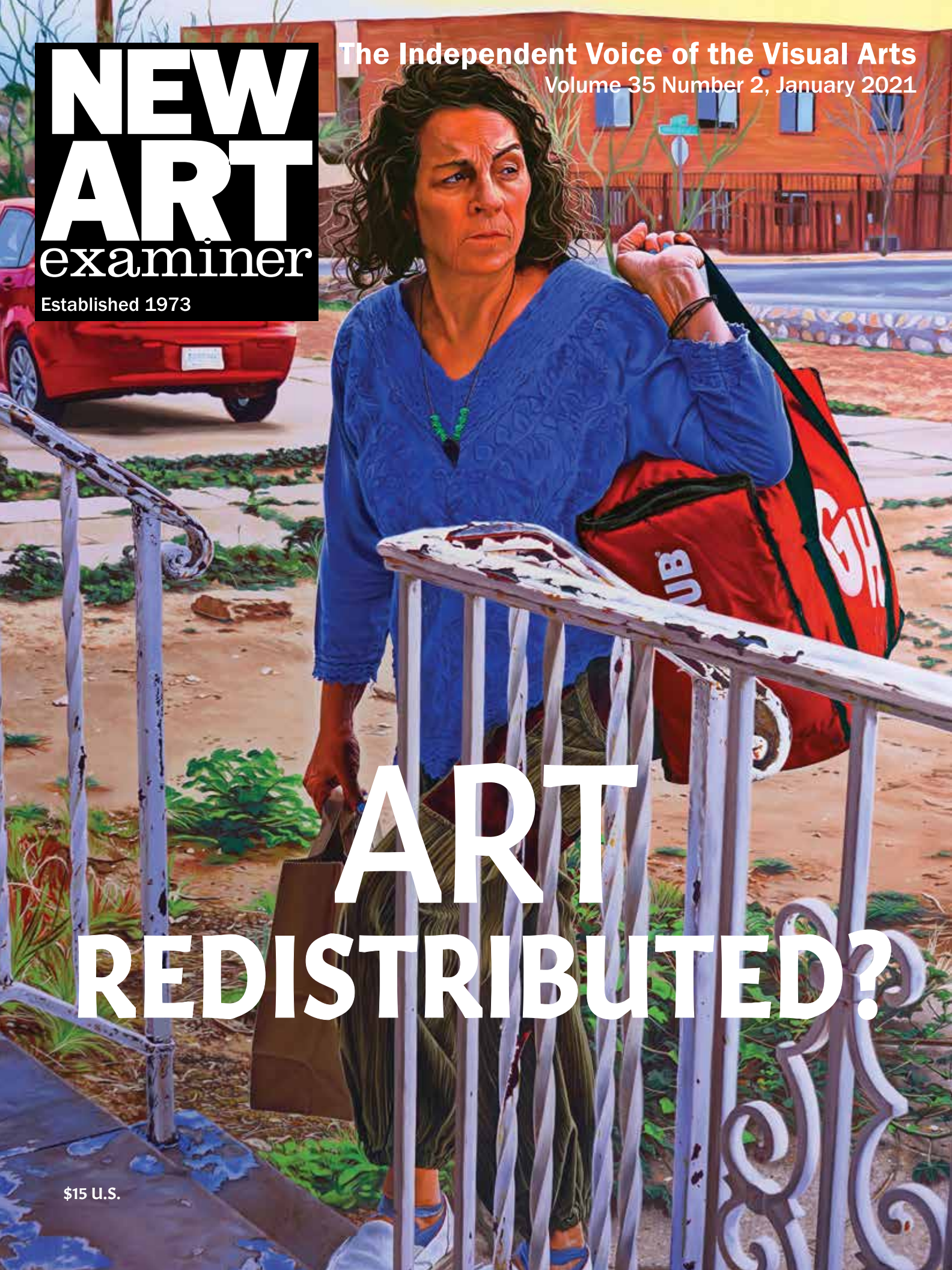

ART REDISTRIBUTED?

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COVER CREDITS
FRONT Marianna Olague, *Mom Delivers Grubhub*, 2020, oil on canvas, 66" x 50". Photo courtesy of David Klein Gallery.

BACK LEFT: Marianna Olague, *Todo Se Vuelve Alma*, 2019, oil on canvas, 66" x 52".
BACK RIGHT: Marianna Olague, *Mom Delivers Grubhub*, 2020, oil on canvas, 66" x 50". Photos courtesy of the artist.

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NEW ART EXAMINER

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Art Redistributed? —Introduction

We have all been on a quite a journey together this past year. There seem to have been more downs than ups, but there has also been a lot of reflection and critical inquiry.

The first edition we published after the pandemic began was the start of something. It represented the closer look we are all taking as a society, as a species, at what got us here and how we were, on the whole, both unprepared but very resilient. This most recent issue focuses on the economics of the art world and its impact on the culture around it. It feels like a third chapter in this ongoing story that we have been piecing together about what to do and how to do it.

For years now, we at the *New Art Examiner* have taken a critical look at the top-down, profit-driven art economy. But as economic turmoil for the many is matched by rising wealth for the few, we are more conscious every day of the disparate societal impact of a broken and corrupt system. The times we live in call for re-invigorated attention and bold ideas that challenge the status quo.

Though there is far more to be discussed, we are proud to present a collection of writing that explores the culture of the art economy and the ways artists and communities are generating new platforms to disrupt the insular art world. K.A. Letts covers Essay'd, a democratized arts writing model emerging in Detroit, and reviews Latina artist Marianna Olague's solo show—also in Detroit. We get an inside look at the labor economy of the art world from a nameless witness to questionable employment practices. In addition, we hear from artists whose socially engaged practices are not only questioning existing economic models but also generating new ones that strive to help sustain communities during the pandemic.

Radical ideas would fall to pieces without a thread to tie them together. Author, curator, activist, and institution builder Nato Thompson has a provided just that with a critique of 21st century art culture and a call for dramatic change. We hope to carry this spirit of innovation and change into 2021 and that you continue with us on this journey.

Happy New Year! Let’s make 2021 a year we can put our names on.

Sincerely,

The Editors

SUBSCRIPTIONS

The ***New Art Examiner*** has a long history of producing serious, independent art criticism. Subscription rates include four printed issues. All issues are available free online as PDFs.

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NEW ART EXAMINER STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *New Art Examiner* is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

WANTED: WRITERS

The *New Art Examiner* is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

Michel Ségard
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Money Moves for the Alternative Art World

by Nato Thompson

Like a cloud hovering above the for-the-most-part broke artists of the planet, money appears mysterious: a gaseous, hard-to-reach netherworld only observed at a distance: Sotheby's and Christie's setting auction records with gavels slamming down and bidders on phones representing clients of God-knows-where, art fairs hosting exclusive parties including guests from bad sitcoms, hobnobbing one percenters in sandalwood-scented hotel lobbies, shimmering cars with doors opening counterintuitively, and other bling-like economic indicators. With all this glittering bedazzlement in the arts, a pernicious question haunts the artist's mind as the years stagger on: if there is so much money in the art world, why am I so broke?

Like the very alienating conditions that probably drove a sad soul to select this economically unviable field in the first place, an artist finds themself yet again participating in a life under the neon lit headline: *you are not invited.* The art life manifests as a VIP party where you press your nose against the outside window, in the cold, slaving away while muttering some mantra that this is, in fact, a noble life calling. And while you may not be wrong, something is clearly not right. What's all the more unbelievable is that this deplorable, oppressive art world situation has been this way for a very long time. The question you must ask yourself during this most upside-down year, when all the rules are out the window and the structures of the art world itself are trembling, is: why do I continue to play this game where I am the guaranteed loser?

It would be a mistake to call the art world capitalist, though it is understandable why that term comes so quickly to our lips. What we really want to say is that it

Nato Thompson, *I sure wish the art world up there, would either rain money on me or acknowledge me,* cartoon. Courtesy of the artist.

Nato Thompson, *O Glorious King*, cartoon. Courtesy of the artist.

is white, exploitative, unjust, imbalanced, male, powerful, and destructive. But rather than use the term capitalist, or even colonialist for that matter, a more appropriate term would be feudalist. For all its self-aggrandizement and claims of the avant-garde and appeals for innovation, the cultural infrastructure of the arts and its implicit luxury economy economics (they are imbricated of course) never truly entered the 18th and 19th century. In fact, the bones of the art world remain solidly Medici-period and rely heavily on a patronage model of vassals, kings, queens, and paupers.

The evidence is everywhere. Look around. Hopefully understanding this simple yet historically loaded analysis may provide solace and insights as one crafts their escape. In what world would a cultural event put on by poor people also be free? The answer: in the art world. Come see exhibitions gratis, don't pay for drinks, just saunter in and enjoy.

This longstanding tradition of the free economy art world is an essential part of the cultural customs of the visual arts community. One couldn't remotely imagine a band playing in that manner, nor could one imagine a theatrical production where you watched for free and had snacks and drinks on-the-house as well. But in the land of galleries and museums, this tradition remains as steadfast as weddings and funerals. We have long rationalized this custom as a space of freedom where the trappings of money do not soil the art experience.

But as Ian MacKaye, the founder of Fugazi and the music genre D.C. hardcore, once quipped to me: "Nothing makes me more paranoid than free. Somebody is paying for this."

Let's pay attention to this pat response. For the non-profits, as we know, their programmatic efforts are made possible by hefty contributions from the ruling class, whose largess finds tax write-off potential and social clique traction in that odd social milieu called boards. Meanwhile, for the galleries, the exhibition acts as a three-dimensional commercial for the backroom deals with collectors. We all know this. Nothing new here. In the realm of contemporary art, culture is either free or too expensive to afford.

I bring up Ian MacKaye because the D.C. hardcore music genre offers a lesson for the art world that we should take note of. He said to me, "When a kid buys a record, they pay $5. I know what it costs to record that album. I know what it cost to press the vinyl and make the sleeve. I know how much the record store gets. I understand how the money moves, and I like it that way." D.C. hardcore wasn't just a music scene. It was a cultural scene that had taken seriously its relationship to money in a manner that was not predatory and was redistributive. In short, D.C. hardcore accomplished what I propose the contemporary art world approach in earnest: an intentional economy

where money circulates in a manner to generate capacity and equity among its culture makers, venues, producers, and fans.

During this destabilized year of the pandemic, the need for alternatives feels more urgent than ever. And while artists and curators have long been amazing at finding innovations in form and content, the actual infrastructure of the art world remains patently static if not stagnant. We have to reshape the fundamental structures of the arts ecology, and this means, essentially, taking seriously the role of money.

I recently started an online school named The Alternative Art School with some artists. We basically applied this D.C. hardcore approach to the school itself. Admittedly, we are using the function of tuition as a form of payment and recirculating it to working artists with a reasonable wage. We apportion our funds to build in equity through intentionally placed scholarships and, down the road, support for alternative spaces. The school is entirely online, and this article comes out of my experience in shaping what I like to call an alternative infrastructure. In fact, just to speak candidly, my new ambition is to be a cultural infrastructure builder.

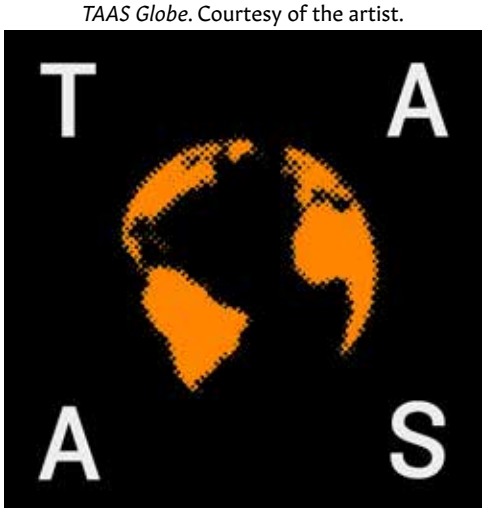
I have been in the art world long enough to hear folks grousing about the problems of higher education: student debt, adjunct teachers, gentrification land grabs. We all know the list. Not surprisingly, the answer from artists reflects a certain naiveté far too familiar in the arts. As I surveyed most of the artist-initiated schools, what I found is a long list of well-intentioned, Utopian projects that refused to engage with money. The gamut of these pedagogical experiments had zero economic sense. I appreciate the sense of doing-good, but the problem with free is simply that it relies on the energy of the organizers, and these platforms dissolve as soon as the organizers inevitably burn out. Being able to pay people provides capacity and durability and thus means a solid foundation to grow and survive.

These lessons apply to more than schools. They can apply to art sales, art magazines, auction houses, art fairs, art lessons, performance art, and socially engaged art. If we take heed of the importance of capacity, scale, equity, economics, radical pedagogy, and a combination of the local and global as these all apply to the creation and maintenance of a more just cultural infrastructure, we can not only produce a new art world—we can employ each other.

Gregory Sholette once referred to the many people who participate in the arts that don't make money and don't benefit from it as "dark matter." They are part of the art world that holds it together but are not represented in the galleries, museums, magazines and glamour. Sound familiar? Well, that "dark matter" is what I am calling upon to build new infrastructures. And to spell it out, in order to build a new alternative art world, we must take seriously the power, utility and benefits of taking money seriously. We can redistribute it, build equity with it, and produce power with it. The art world can be ours if we take seriously the coordination and construction of an alternative. And if we do that, we can finally kiss this patronage Medici-period 1% luxury economy model goodbye. We can finally stop staring at clouds and kings and participate in a world of our co-production. ■

Nato Thompson is an author and curator based in the city of brotherly love, Philadelphia. He writes often about contemporary art and politics. He has also been doing interviews on Instagram on IGLIVE @natothompson with a show titled "Lets Talk Alternatives."

Nato Thompson, still from the animated GIF *TAAS Globe*. Courtesy of the artist.



Nato Thompson, *Bad Brains*, cartoon. Courtesy of the artist.

Art Handler Confidential

by Anonymous

If you spend some part of your day in traffic, you have probably seen small- to medium-sized box trucks without any information indicating what is inside. No company name or "How's my driving?" contact number. No description of general services like "Plumbing" or "Moving" that the company may provide. This is a common enough sight that few people's curiosity will be piqued. But if you have ever wondered what may be inside one of these beat-up jalopies, there is a good chance that at some point, you have seen one carrying some art. And not just stuff from Pier 1. These objects could be valued at hundreds of thousands, even millions of dollars.

Discretion is obviously necessary when handling highly valued private property. Some companies do advertise, but think about how many company names you have seen on the side of a truck. How many of them were clearly for art handling? You may also think that art does not change hands very often, but this not true. Art gets moved every day. More and more art gets made, and more museums open across the country and start building collections.

This expectation of discretion carries over to the life of the art handler. The art handler must be quiet, focused, and respectful of the space they are in and the objects they are working with. They must have technical abilities and knowledge that few people do. It is a specialized, skilled trade that is carried out by people who are often well educated and have advanced degrees. Yet not many aspire to choose art handling as a career path. Why shouldn't they? If one is interested in art, would it not be desirable to work within the field of the arts?

When I started working as a full-time art handler two years ago, I was excited about the opportunity. I knew it was not a glamourous job and not a lucrative one. Like any job, I knew that it would sometimes be boring and occasionally stressful. But I would get to work with my hands, build new skills, see parts of the city I had never seen before, and even get to look at interesting artwork. Even better, I had found a company that was different. They were national, with a corporate office and benefits. They presented themselves as "a place to hang your hat." I thought I had found a career. Instead, what I found were deceptive practices, a hostile work environment, wage theft, and like so many other industries in this country, a culture which prefers workers who are de-skilled and disposable rather than valued and treated with dignity.

It is not lost on me that this sounds bitter and that there are many people out there suffering from unemployment or stuck in worse positions. But in the growing movement for workers' rights, fair pay, and job security, it is important to call attention to yet another industry in which people find themselves stuck living paycheck to paycheck, with no opportunities for growth and little to no mobility into another career, particularly when that industry is at the heart of a system in which the wealthiest people in the world have control over the production and distribution of monetized global culture and social capital

Seeing the art world from the belly of the beast.

An art handler friend once told me a story about a day they were working in a museum. A team of carpenters had come in to work on some new construction. One of them looked around in awe of the vast white, austere space and then looked at my friend and said, "Wow, you must make good money here." My friend just laughed. It is a common misconception that the wealth and power behind museums extends to those who make it all possible. And there is a lot of wealth and power.

In the United States, museums rely on endowments, fundraising campaigns, and revenue generation through entry fees, memberships, and food and gift shop sales. In addition, events, educational programming, and the hosting of "blockbuster" touring exhibits like "David Bowie Is" help bring in more bodies, which I'm guessing makes some of the more stuffy curators cringe.

The data are murky, but on average, North American museums receive roughly fifteen percent of their fund-

ing from government sources as opposed to a majority of government funding received by their European counterparts. Europe is shifting their museum funding models to function more like the ones here in the US, but many of them still receive a majority of funding through their government.

As Malcolm Gladwell points out in the "Dragon Psychology 101" episode of the *Revisionist History* podcast, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art holds over 2 million objects in its collection. Nevertheless, in 2018, the museum decided to fire ninety employees and start charging admission up to $25 for adults. Gladwell points out that the Met could have easily solved their budget crisis by selling off just a few of the objects in their vast collection. This would have been a short-term solution in the least but would have bought them time to protect their employees' jobs and address long-term models for sustainability.

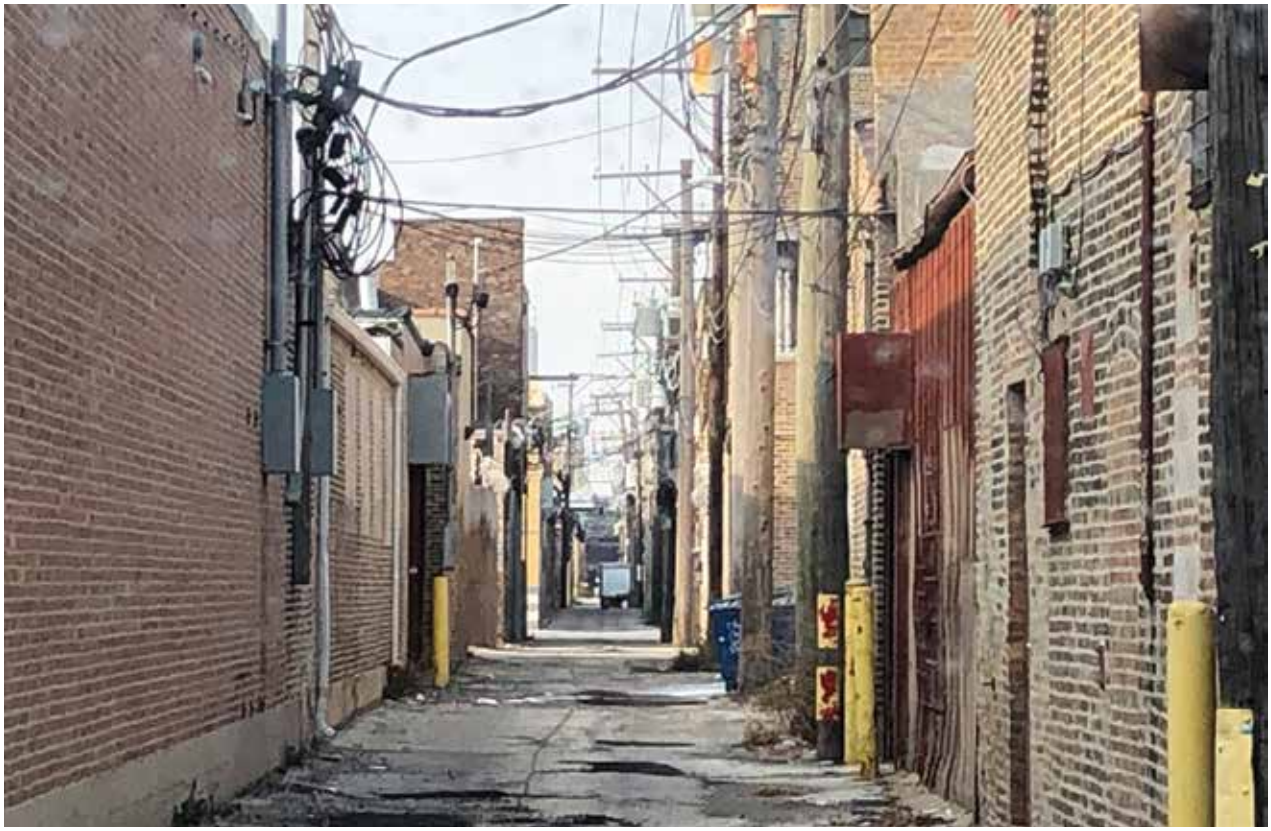
Gladwell makes the case that this is a kind of large-scale institutionalized hoarding, and I have no reason to disagree with him. But how is an obsession with art objects different from just plain old greed? The gap between earnings and cost of living for the middle and working class has been growing for decades, keeping already oppressed people marginalized and adding more younger people to that pool every day. The art world is not all that much different but for the distinction of allure. The idea of the artist is still one that is romanticized in our culture—that of the visionary who is discovered as the voice of their generation, who will hold a mirror up to society, forcing us all to see ourselves for what we really are, ultimately changing the world. Okay, maybe that is a naïve idea from a bygone era. But art schools today can still generate six figures of tuition payments for a two-year master's degree, bringing in millions in revenue each year and building a pool of thousands of young artists from which high society can pluck out a few and place them on a pedestal. The rest will find other work: teaching, design, food service, retail, and, of course, art handling.

The art handling profession

Art handlers are problem solvers. They are often confronted with logistical problems no one has confronted before. As art objects become more complicated and desirable, it falls on the art handler to get them from point A to point B.

They navigate trucks through city traffic and into narrow alley ways and loading docks. They deduce ways of carefully dismantling large paintings so they can be transported up century-old elevators and stairwells whose architects never foresaw the whims of future residents. They drive in pairs across the country from one city to the next, loading and off-loading crates containing objects of

A Chicago alleyway. Just one of the many types of places art handlers find themselves. Photo by the author.



Some of the tools most commonly used by art handlers. Photo by the author.

the aforementioned historical, cultural, and monetary value. They spend their days in windowless warehouses and wood shops, building those crates or moving them around from shelf to shelf, truck to truck. Depending on the art handler, much of their time is spent in the vast white cubes of the well-funded gallery and museum world. Others are permitted into the homes of people who have obtained great wealth and influence and have art collections valued at millions of dollars (even the billions in some cases) to show for it. They take detailed notes and photographic documentation of entire collections in people's homes, even traveling to other states for week-long overnight trips if the job demands it.

On paper, it is a decent job to have. In practice, not so much. The more experienced art handlers I have spoken to have told me stories of rampant drug abuse on the job, in some cases by upper management. Others have described verbal abuse from employers and clients alike. I myself have seen denial of pay to long-distance truckers left out on the road because of canceled deliveries. In one instance, two drivers I know were on the road for three weeks and only paid for six of those days. When they asked permission to drive home (which they were only five hours away from) for a few days, they were told to get a hotel. These same drivers told me they often feel pressured to get the cheapest hotel option and choose to sleep in the cab of the truck rather than stay in a room of questionable cleanliness. I have heard stories of disputes between drivers, physical altercations, and abandonment over the road. I have seen professional long-distance drivers come and go because they are hired to drive, only to find out they will spend more time in a warehouse taking out trash than driving. Frequent truck breakdowns and canceled jobs don't help in retaining qualified drivers who can find other work.

This is just one example of the false promises some companies make to get people in the door. Both myself and people I have spoken to have been offered opportunities for advancement, only to be strung along for months, being told they will soon get their promotion: "We just have to complete this warehouse project or hire this many long-distance drivers." In my case, the can got kicked down the road so many times I repeatedly asked for a date, a performance review, feedback, any indication of what the future held for me at the company. Finally, one day, after my manager got tired of my asking, he just told me to get another job.

This, especially during the pandemic, has become a common refrain. No annual performance review? You're just lucky to have a job. Where is my overtime pay? You're just lucky to have a job. I worked through my lunch break without pay? You're lucky to have a job. My paycheck shows less hours than I worked? You're lucky to have a job.

It's true. We are lucky to have jobs. But that does not mean we cannot or should not advocate for ourselves. The deception runs even deeper within these businesses when there is opportunity to exploit the pandemic. After I returned to work in June at my company, things were slow. Some staff members left. But the work picked up after all the delayed exhibitions had to be resolved and private collectors started buying and moving art again. We started working more hours on tighter timelines with

fewer staff, all going out into the city during a pandemic that has killed at least 300,000 people in this country as of the middle of December. One of our staff even caught COVID-19. And clients don't always wear masks. I heard stories of disdain from clients whom colleagues asked to wear a mask while they worked in their homes. Sure, we have to put booties over our shoes to protect their floors, but they can't wear masks to protect us from infection. Fortunately, those instances have been rare.

All this was happening while management claimed the company was in financial jeopardy. No raises, no performance reviews, no new hires to lighten the workload, no regular testing for COVID-19. The complaints were growing, morale was lower than ever, the work environment more hostile than it already had been before the pandemic. When management called a meeting to explain that the company was hanging by a thread, this claim was undermined just hours later when the corporate office sent out a company-wide email saying job bookings were up over sixty percent from last year and they would be buying new trucks and building an addition to their warehouse at headquarters.

The culture of the industry and the art market collide

The broader cultural issue is one I have seen throughout the industry. There is a bitterness. It is a kind of angry resignation—a disdain for the very work one is carrying out to make a living.

Art handling can be quite demoralizing for a number of reasons. If you have read this far, they are probably obvious. But it is not just the low pay and toxic work environments. It is the clear class distinctions the lowest people on the totem pole face when they go to work and see not just the quality-of-life wealth can provide, but the degree to which the world is regulated by this elite minority—not just the way in which they regulate the art world and its economy. I was on a job once moving paintings in a penthouse apartment when I overheard the client debating over the phone which former secretary of state they wanted to invite to a party. The two mentioned did not get along with one another. Quite a pickle.

These are the original influencers. I'm not talking about sexy gym rats on Instagram or funny pantomimers on TikTok. These people have been playing the long game behind the scenes for decades, just as the tycoons, monarchs, merchants, clergy, and dictators did before them for centuries—only now it is no longer the power of the image that holds sway over society. Who needs religious iconography or poignant allusions to classical narratives when you can have works so deeply mired in intellectually rigorous conceptuality or ambiguous abstraction that no one could ever doubt your intent to own art as simply "a patron of the arts"? Instead, the mass appeal of fine art has been slowly filtered out over time. We have TV, mov-

A view from the lower loading dock area of the Art Institute of Chicago. Photo by the author.

ies, and video games for that now. Fine art is simply a low-risk speculative trade with built-in return on investment determined by the person doing the speculating.

Art handling companies' warehouses are filled with portions of the private collections of billionaires who house these items under multiple accounts with different names, some of which are non-profits. This is not even to mention that, in recent years, wealthy private art collectors have been building museums with limited public access in order to get a tax write off on their entire collection.

As far as I know, it is legally dubious to consider the storage of a private art collection as a tax-deductible expense essential to the function of a non-profit organization, particularly when those collected objects are packed away in boxes collecting dust for years on end. Project managers have joked about how a client wants a new crate to store a piece and how the cost of the new crate (which can be in the thousands of dollars) is just more added value to the work of art itself. So, is the value of the artwork determined by the owner as opposed to the market? In this case, they are one and the same—auction house, dealer, collector. I once knelt to hold a steel sculpture at an angle so a conservator could inspect the bottom. A project manager later told me the piece (a very famous one) was purchased by the client for ninety million dollars. From whom? From someone else who had previously paid eighty million.

Storing art may not always be tax deductible, but donating it is. If a piece of art gets passed around a few times with a ten-million-dollar price here and another million there added on, that's a pretty nice profit when you get tired of looking at a thing and decide it is worthy of public viewing. If only museum patrons knew it is not just the entry fee they are paying to see that piece of art. They are also paying into an imbalanced tax system in which the wealthiest art collectors received a massive tax break in 2017. In theory (and in other countries) it should be one or the other: fund the museum through admission or through the tax system.

How can it change?

I was tempted to list more details from my own and fellow art handlers' day-to-day experiences in this toxic work environment. But what it boils down to is poor communication, failed leadership, cowardly management, and a level of arrogance that can only be ascribed to the demoralizing nature of the work. If it is not already obvious, this a male-dominated industry. The company I work for has no female art handlers, but other companies do, and I'm sure they can do the job just as well as their male counterparts. But gender disparities in art careers is a topic for another article.

Artworks' travel accommodations. Photo by the author.

Artwork ready for shipping (NYC Lower East Side, 2017). Photo by Michel Ségard.

When fixing the broken culture of the art handling industry, one would think better protections for workers could boost morale and incentivize higher performance. But this is America. Land of the free... to exploit others for personal gain. One need only to look to recent attempts art handlers in Chicago and New York have made to unionize to see what kind of pressure we face.

Here in Chicago, back in 2014, Mana-Terry Dowd, LLC, came close to unionizing with Teamsters Local 705, but the decision was left undecided after votes were challenged on the grounds that company managers who opposed unionization cast invalid ballots. Allegations of intimidation tactics were filed by employees against the company as reported in the *Tribune* as well as other local publications.

Similar issues have persisted in New York. Though many museums in New York have unionized workers, the private companies that have been cornering the art handling market do not. Initially, the work went to moving companies, but many of them stopped doing that kind of work, opening the door for specialized art services companies to hire handlers with art degrees.

As reported by *Artsy* and *Art News*, one of these companies, UOVO, has been leading the union busting charge against its own employees, deploying tactics (similar to those used by Mana-Terry Dowd) of intimidation, misinformation, and threats. Most recently, UOVO management used the pandemic as an excuse to fire employees who had voiced support for unionization while others got paid furlough. A UOVO employee and union organizer, Daniel Powers, spoke simply and truthfully to *LaborPress.org*, stating that "art is no longer art. It is stock," and that "we hold the most valuable things per pound in the world for the richest people in the world."

New York has a growing movement to improve workers' rights in the field of art handling. This is thanks to the Art Handlers Alliance of New York (a.k.a. AHA-NY), which drafted "The Art Handler's Bill of Rights," and Phantom Designs owner Hazel Molina, who helped negotiate the first union contract with a private art handling company in New York.

The movement towards unionization is slow and difficult, but these people in NYC are showing us that it is possible. I am not a Chicago native, but I have long been under the impression that this city has a strong history of labor organizing. It would be a shame to let that legacy wither in the face of weak leaders who have more power over workers than they know what to do with.

The art economy as it stands today is one that can generate vast amounts of wealth for a select group of people while relying on undercompensated, unprotected labor to do so. No matter how educated or skilled those laborers are, they are subject to a system that presses the notion that a career in the arts is a path one chooses at their own peril. But as with so many other working-class industries in this country, the myth of rugged individualism is deployed to deny the existence of collective effort and shared responsibility. It is time for these disparities to be resolved, and in the art economy, it must fall on the artists and small business owners to make the change and for art itself to be reclaimed by the people.. ■

Essay'd: A New Model for Arts Writing?

by K.A. Letts

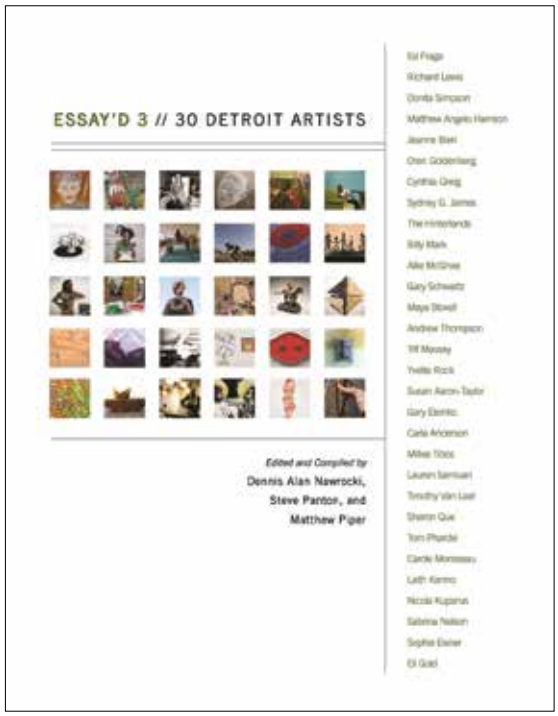
Detroit is the land of do it yourself for artists. The financial and political travails of the city have paradoxically allowed room—both physical and psychological—for a flourishing underground art scene. In 21st century Detroit, there is space, it seems, for a variety of visions, and scant interference from traditional gatekeepers. There are plenty of talented artists in the city, but Detroit-on-the-mend still lacks some important components necessary for the evolution of a viable cultural ecosystem.

The lack of regular and rigorous arts writing stands out as a particular problem. Promising new publications such as *Infinite Mile*, *ARTS.BLACK*, *Detroit Research*, and *Detroit Cultural* have struggled to publish regularly, victims of chronic underfunding. These fledgling publications wink into and out of existence like so many shooting stars, never achieving true sustainability.

A bright spot in this challenging environment is *Essay'd* (essayd.org), a one-of-a-kind arts writing project that aims to provide cultural context and critical coverage to Detroit's artists and public through an egalitarian process that might be called cultural crowd-sourcing. The originator of the project, Steve Panton, conceived of it in 2015 as a vehicle for providing a broad, non-hierarchical overview of the community of artists in the region by allowing a variety of established and aspiring arts writers to choose the artists they will write about. Each writer writes a 750 word, one-page essay on the artist. In conversation, Panton adds, "We simply ask the writer to write about the artist that most excites them right now." At the end of each year, the essays are collected into a published edition, providing a snapshot of the artists active in the city at that moment.

Steve Panton describes the original germ of an idea for *Essay'd*:

> *I grew up in a fairly ordinary background in the UK, and when I went to New Zealand at 26, I had never actually been to an art gallery or really thought much about art. Part of the inspiration for* Essay'd *was a book called 100 New Zealand Paintings by 100 New Zealand Artists, which featured a single page written overview of each artist. The format was very accessible and digestible, and it gave me a pathway into an aspect of New Zealand culture that was otherwise invisible to me. As a gallerist in Detroit, I wanted to do something similar for the Detroit art world.*



Essay'd 3 (essays 61-90 in series), print edition cover, published 2018 by Wayne State University Press.

The scope of the *Essay'd* project now far exceeds the modest goals of the book that inspired Panton all those years ago, but the organizing principle remains.

When *Essay'd* started out, its stated purpose was to provide a broad overview of artists working in the Detroit area. The first collection in book form, with 30 short es-

LEFT: Matthew Piper, editor of Essay'd. Photo by Jeff Cancelosi.

RIGHT: Steve Panton, co-founder and associate editor of *Essay'd*. Photo by Jeff Cancelosi.

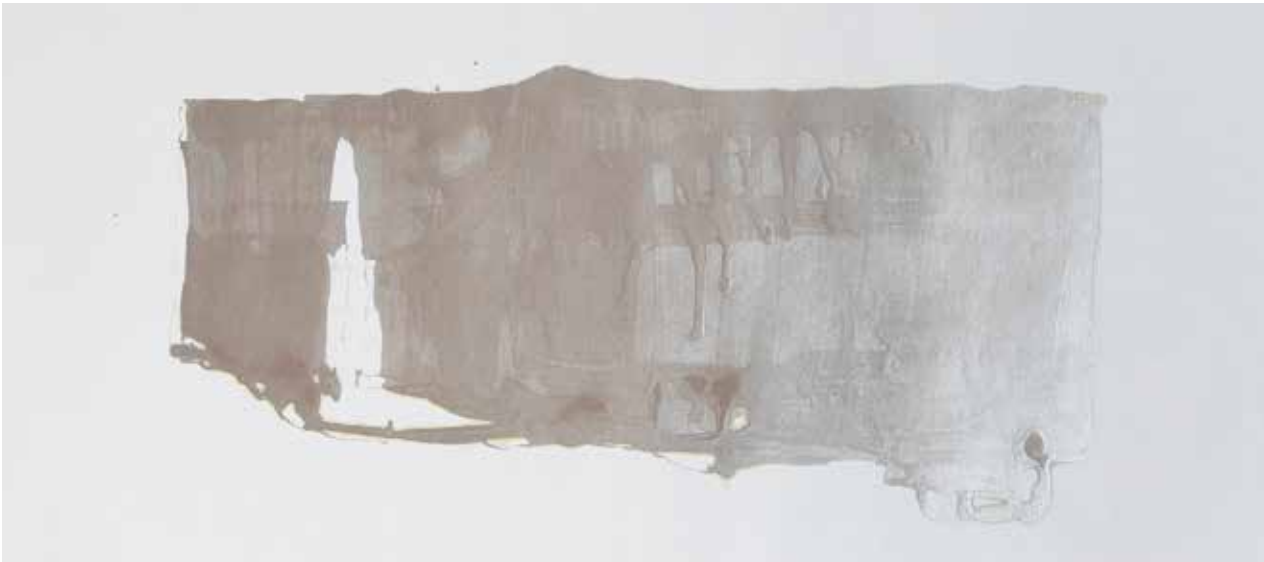
says on Detroit artists, was printed in 2016, in partnership with Wayne State University Press. Most of the early pieces were written by Steve Panton and Dennis Alan Nawrocki (who literally wrote the book on Detroit public art, *Art in Detroit Public Places*). These veteran arts writers were soon joined by another experienced observer of the Detroit art scene, Matthew Piper, who currently serves as editor in chief of *Essay'd*. Since the first edition of the book, two additional collections have been published.

Panton and Piper insist that they play only a modest part in selecting the artists who are the subjects of the essays (more on that later). The artists represented in each of the collections vary widely, ranging from eminent veterans like Charles McGee and Elizabeth Youngblood to rising talents like Shaina Kasztelan, Bakpak Durden and Armageddon Beachparty.

Over time, the development of new voices writing about artists in Detroit has become a more central part of the project's mission. Now, along with providing an overview of artists working in Detroit—140 and counting—the editors have identified and mentored 32 arts writers of diverse backgrounds, experience and ethnicities. Some, like playwright and poet Bill Harris, arts administrator MaryAnn Wilkinson and cultural critic Vince Carducci, are experienced writers looking to have their say on contemporary art in Detroit, while others are young would-be art critics hoping to develop their observational and analytical skills with help from the editors of *Essay'd*. Panton says, "If you take the helicopter view, we are creating writing, but we are also creating the writers, or the culture of writing." He continues, "What I mean by that is that we have a platform where people can publish, we have an editorial process where people can get serious feedback on their writing, [and] we have an educational process of workshops that allow people to step into that."

The *Essay'd* project seems to have found the sweet spot of sustainability in a challenging cultural climate through donations, grants and royalties from book sales. And true to their stated goal to "transition... arts writing and curating in Detroit from low-performing (and often unpaid) activities to high-performing (and paid) activities," they have been able to pay their writers nearly double the prevailing rates for arts writing. Panton says, "You pull yourself up by the bootstraps when you start a project like this. You've

Elizabeth Youngblood, *Horizontal Silver*, 2018, silver paint on paper. Photo by the artist.



Ryan Standfest, *Supply + Demand*, 2019-2020, approx. 20' h x 50' w, painted mural with wood crate constructions. Photo by the artist.

got to create the cultural capital...So when we were starting off, there was no money, but the people who created the cultural capital owned the products of their labor."

This "cultural capital" has, over the last five years, come to have a tangible value for the artists profiled in *Essay'd*. When quizzed about the possibility that artists and writers could—just possibly—engage in a bit of quid pro quo in the writing of their essays, Panton and Piper maintain that the project's rigorous, multi-step editing process corrects for and filters out occasional bad faith efforts. "We depend on the honor system," says Panton. "Our belief is that if you get a diverse group of writers together and they honestly write about the artists that they are most excited about, you will get a diverse picture of the Detroit art world."

While this trust in the good intentions of all concerned may seem naïve on its face, my interviews with writers and artists have confirmed a high level of integrity in the process. Why this should be and whether it is sustainable as the number of writers and artists grows and as the professional stakes become ever higher, remains open to question. But for now, the system works.

The editors of *Essay'd* exercise a fairly robust editorial process, which can result in a published essay that's often substantively different from the writer's first draft. The contributors contacted for this article, many of them experienced writers in other fields, seemed quite happy with their editorial interactions. Ryan Standfest, who has both written for *Essay'd* and been the subject of a profile, expresses the consensus view via email: "I find Steve and Matthew to exercise a very rigorous but fair editing process... In my experience, I enjoyed a little pushback on conceptual points which moved me to clarify rather than to strike out a passage entirely." He adds, "As a writer, I want strong editors to be in conversation with, rather than someone who says 'do whatever you want.' It demonstrates a high level of concern and care and respect for the text and the author. An editor who does not mind the text, is doing [a] disservice to the writer and the larger project."

Bakpak Durden, *Self-Portrait: Control*, 2019, 24" x 24", oil on handmade wood panel. Photo by the artist.

Recent contributing writer and artist Mariwyn Curtin found *Essay'd* to be a door into the cultural life of the city. "I started reading *Essay'd* in 2019 after I made a move to Detroit in 2016. I was still working (online) for other places well outside of Detroit, like Australia and Arizona, but I wasn't engaged in [the city's art scene] as much as I wanted to be." So she decided to take a hiatus and to structure her own internship and to "learn" Detroit art. She says, "Early on, I came across an article about Iris Eichenberg in *Essay'd*, related to the MOCAD show Useless Utility... [*Essay'd*] really did cover who you needed to know—and then I went out into the art world, and it was like characters in a book, suddenly coming alive." Curtin points out that as the art scene in Detroit grows, it will become increasingly important to have a source of critical content specifically for Detroit artists. She explains, "In 2019 there was an uptick of more galleries opening, galleries that were showing, if not international artists, then artist who were not Detroit artists... I think it is really important to have a publication that is centered in Detroit... before the next big wave [of gentrification and internationalization.]"

Dalia Reyes, *Portal to Aldebaran (Portal Series I)*, 2020, 36" x 36", oil on wood, gold and silver leaf. Photo by the artist.

Curtin's most recent contribution to *Essay'd* is her profile of Dalia Reyes, a young Latina artist who came to Detroit from Mexico at 5 years of age and grew up between the Ambassador Bridge and Detroit Union Station. A graduate of the College for Creative Studies, Reyes is exemplative of the kind of artist who might struggle for recognition without the validation provided by *Essay'd*. While she knew of the project, she was surprised to get a call from Curtin. She says, "I didn't know Mariwyn at all; I think she came across my work on Instagram." Reyes brought work to Galerie Camille for Curtin to see, since the COVID-19 pandemic made a studio visit impractical. After their interview, Reyes had an opportunity to see the finished essay and gave it the green light with one stipulation: she wanted it translated into Spanish. And so her profile became the first bilingual entry for *Essay'd*.

While the creation, collection and annual publication of Detroit artists' profiles continues, *Essay'd* adds other programs to address perceived cultural deficits and opportunities throughout the city. These include Art @ The Max, a rotating exhibition that brings visual arts by some of the region's leading artists to patrons of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and an expanding workshop program that mentors aspiring arts writers and fledgling curators. In 2016, Matthew Piper offered the first workshop on arts writing at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Since then there have been five writing workshops that cover artist statements, art criticism, arts publishing and the like. Steve Panton, an accomplished independent curator and gallerist in his own right, has offered several workshops intended to guide and mentor aspiring curators in organizing and mounting their first exhibitions. His workshops cover curatorial best practices as well as online curating and curating in ecology. These highly interactive classes have gone online during the pandemic and have, serendipitously, begun to reach an audience outside Detroit that is hungry for expertise.

Even as they mentor new writers and run workshops, *Essay'd* editors Panton and Piper continue to write themselves about Detroit artists who they consider to be significant. This is the point at which their stated hands-off stance on gate keeping begins to seem just a little disingenuous. Indeed, Piper told me recently that although *Essay'd* has a solid record of writing about artists of color, he felt the need to write more, as he put it, "in service of uplifting Black voices."

Though the editors carefully abstain from any claims to be creating an authoritative overview of artists in Detroit, they have been responsible for compiling a persuasive body of opinion that must influence the conversation about art in Detroit going forward. And they can also take credit for opening up the discussion about Detroit's art scene to a variety of new voices and visions, while presiding over the aggregation of an elastic and inclusive stealth canon of important Detroit artists that can grow and change over time. ■

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The Money Power and Art

by Diane Thodos

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The representation of private interests... abolishes all natural and spiritual distinctions by enthroning in their stead the immoral, irrational and soulless abstraction of a particular material object and a particular consciousness which is slavishly subordinated to this object.

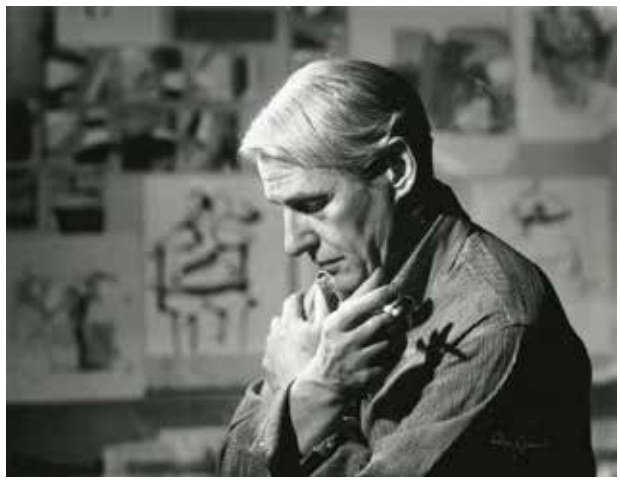
— Karl Marx[1]

Money is the alienated essence of man's labor and life; and this alien essence dominates him as he worships it.

— Karl Marx[2]

In the 20th Century you can track almost every decade with a great art movement... Now we get to the 21st century and what's the great art movement?... There isn't one except if you say the art market.

— Josh Baer, art advisor[3]



Willem de Kooning in his studio. Photo source: Wikipedia.

In 2015, the Illinois hedge fund billionaire Ken Griffin bought Willem de Kooning's 1955 painting *Interchange* for $300 million and paid $200 million for Jackson Pollock's 1948 painting *Number 17A*. In the words of Larry Fink, the chairman of the world's largest asset manager, BlackRock, "The two greatest stores of wealth internationally today is contemporary art...[and] apartments in Manhattan... Vancouver, and London."[4]

Such astronomical sums for art challenge whatever the imagination could have possibly conceived back in 1973 during the auction of the Ethel and Robert Scull collection of contemporary art. 50 contemporary artworks were sold for the then unheard-of sum of $2.2 million. It was a moment that signaled the beginning of the end of art values—social, human, historic, traditional, existential, aesthetic—and the rise of art as an instrument of finance held in corporate holdings, tax freeports, warehouses, bank vaults, and private collections. What has led to the collapse of the existential, aesthetic, social, and humanistic point of art to the pure transactional power of money? What exactly is the neoliberal economic ideology that arose in the Reagan era which has led to this state of affairs 40 years later? Has neoliberal ideology disrupted natural human social and relationships to such a degree that creating an authentic art praxis can no longer be coherently conceived? Have recent social movements signaled the possibility that some alternative to its control and power may be on the horizon?

To begin, I would like to look back to a time before the onset of neoliberalism in order to consider the critical factors that allowed for the development of the abstract expressionist movement in the United States from the 1930s to the early 1950s. This was predominantly before the major artists of this movement had gained any kind of market recognition or national status.

First, the abstract expressionist artists were deeply influenced by many major modern European artists who had fled WWII and the Nazis to settle in New York City. They brought a rich consciousness of the modernist movements they participated in, including the recent surrealist invention of automatism. Automatism unleashed

Willem de Kooning, *Untitled,* 1950. Black enamel paint on off-white wove paper. © 2018 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

the dynamism of the unconscious mind, which they would fuse with the power of gesture. This had a tremendous impact on Pollock, de Kooning, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, and Robert Motherwell, among many others. The Marxist-leaning writers Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both of whom wrote for left-wing *Partisan Review*, became serious intellectual supporters of the movement. Their embrace of a Marxist-inspired critique of culture invited a new kind of interpretive depth and intellectual rigor to art writing and criticism. Having a skill-based formal art training was crucial to working through the influences of the modern masters. De Kooning could draw with the precision of Ingres while also absorbing the influences of Picasso, Matisse, Soutine, and Gorky. Pollock was a student of Thomas Hart Benton and the surrealist printmaker Stanley William Hayter while also engaging the influences of Picasso and the Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

But most significant of all was the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and its employment of thousands of artists from 1935-1943 as part of FDR's New Deal program to put unemployed people back to work and have the government pay for it. The New Deal was based on a new economic model established by British economist John Maynard Keynes, a bold experiment in resuscitating the economy following the onset of the Great Depression. Historians Jonathan Burgos and Netty Ismail describe its dramatic importance to the national art scene:

> *Its impact upon de Kooning and many other artists was incalculable. For the first time, American artists came together in substantial numbers, able to devote their full energies to art. By 1936, more than six thousand artists had joined the project. It was a scholarship for all. As Herzl Emanuel described it, 'It was a period*

A sale of impressionist and modern art at Sotheby's New York salesroom in May 2019. Photo courtesy of Sotheby's.

of tremendous discovery for people who had had no break in life up to that point.' With the artists' newfound unity came a sense of confidence, possibility, and empowerment. Until that time... 'there wasn't any art world'... There wasn't any café life. There wasn't any center to go to.[5]

Willem de Kooning vividly recalls the critical effect the WPA had on him:

The Project was terribly important. It gave us enough to live on and we could paint what we wanted. It was terrific largely because of its director, Burgoyne Diller. I had to resign after a year because I was an alien, but even in that short time, I changed my attitude toward being an artist. Instead of doing odd jobs and painting on the side, I painted and did odd jobs on the side.[6]

The WPA jump-started a unique cultural moment in the United States. For the first time, artists were able to organically create their own self-generating, self-supporting, and self-influencing networks—in other words, create a "center." The many informal gatherings they had in studios, bars, and cafes resulted in the formation of "The Club," which regularly met for many historically important and spirited discussions about art and culture.

Sojourner Truth in WPA mural with artist Norman Carton, 1941. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

Abstract expressionism depended on these critical elements: the democratic socialist economic reforms of the New Deal, having a skill-based education, and historical modernist art engagement with modernist and Marxist-inspired artists and intellects, along with the social interdependence of living artists generating their own dynamic social praxis.

Today stands in stark contrast with the degree to which all these important social, political, and economic factors have been swept away. The mid-1980s brought about a new, radical, ideologically driven form of capitalism broadly enacted by the policies of U.S. president Ronald Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher. Known as neoliberals, the believers in this system sought to dismantle all the New Deal economic and social reforms. It was an assault on the redistribution of wealth that the New Deal had established, attacking progressive taxation, corporate regulation, Social Security, affordable healthcare, education, and housing, and strong labor unions, to name only a few of its victims. American political theorist and author Wendy Brown explains what happened:

Combined with globalization, neoliberalism has eviscerated the fabric of social life, produced mounting economic insecurity... Neoliberalism is essentially a form of governing that sees democracy as an obstacle, at best, or as an illegitimate intervention into the rule of the market, at worst. For neoliberalism, rule by markets is understood as a form of governance that should be applied everywhere, not just to marketed goods, but to education, prisons, the organization of state, and so on. So neoliberalism treats popular sovereignty, or decisions based on human agreement and deliberation, as inappropriate interference with the efficient market and the price mechanism.[7]

The ideological basis for neoliberalism went much further than previous kinds of capitalism by commodifying aspects of contemporary life, not only in the economy but in ALL *social, political, cultural, and psychological* spheres as well. The most important feature of neoliberal ideology was the *abolition of the idea that society and human relationships exist.* Thatcher said it best: *"There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."* Thatcher's endlessly repeated slogan, *"There is no alternative,"* laid out the iron rule that a market economy, and no other, is the *only* one that works:

...[Neoliberalism disseminates] the idea that your task is to enhance your value, keep it from depreciating, and do this at every level, from your social media profile to your resume, to the particular things you volunteer for, to your particular networks... The enterprenurialization [of the self] is an earlier phase; then we get the financialization of the self... you then start to get the move to present and brand yourself such that you attract investors in that self... It's not about literally

U.S. President Ronald Reagan with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United kingdom in the Oval Office, 1988. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

having a financial portfolio, it's about treating yourself as if you were one.[8]

Margaret Thatcher implicitly understood this when she said, "Economics are the method, *but the object is to change the heart and soul.*" The subject was to be molded, produced, and reproduced by ideological indoctrination. These demands to "financialize" oneself, to be alienated from one's real self—to displace the real self with a market-based self in hyper competition with all other selves—have resulted in social nihilism and the destruction of a functioning democratic society, which is all too apparent in the age of Trump. "Atomization," says scholar Henry Giroux, "fueled by a fervor for unbridled individualism produces a pathological disdain for community, public values and the public good."[9] People treat each other as objects—bits of capital to be exploited—and not "subjects" as you would have in a participatory democratic system. Indeed, art has been supremely de-subjectified and objectified in the same way that people have been. This is reflected as much by auction house prices as by the degree to which artists are eager to embrace the neoliberal "branding" and marketing of themselves.

All this explains why art today is judged by a single criterion—its financial value—and *no other*. Art critic and scholar Donald Kuspit's seminal 2007 *Artnet* essay "Art Values or Money Values" sums up this state of affairs:

Willem de Kooning's *Interchange*, 1955, sold for $300 million in 2015. Photo source : Wikipedia.org.

Barnett Newman. *Untitled 3*, 1950. Through prior gift of Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison. © 2018 Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

> *Many years ago Meyer Schapiro argued that there was a radical difference between art's spiritual value and its commercial value. He warned against the nihilistic effect of collapsing their difference. I will argue that today, in the public mind, and perhaps in the unconscious of many artists, there is no difference. The commercial value of art has usurped its spiritual value, indeed, seems to determine it. Art's esthetic, cognitive, emotional and moral value—its value for the dialectical varieties of critical consciousness—has been subsumed by the value of money.*[10]

The power of this ideological transformation is demonstrated by the degree to which artists themselves are complicit in their own dehumanization:

> *Art's willingness, even eagerness to be absorbed by money—to estheticize money, as it were—suggests that art, like every other enterprise, from the cultural to the technological (and culture has become an extension and even mode of technological practice in many quarters) is a way of making and worshipping money—a way of affirming capitalism. Indeed, it is a way of signaling the triumph of capitalism over socialism, that is, the unimpeded pursuit of money and profit at the cost of the common human good that might be achieved by the re-distribution of capitalist-generated wealth...*
>
> *You may say that money values have nothing to do with art values. But art prices not only impinge on them, but imply there is no need for independent evaluation of art. Any independent consciousness of art misses the capitalist point that it... has become a form of equity—estheticized equity, but equity before it is esthetic...*[11]

Since Kuspit's essay was written 13 years ago, the financialization of art has become even more extreme. A de Kooning painting sold at auction in 2006 for $27 million. In 2019, a similar one sold for $200 million—more than 11 times the price. It is a sign that the monetization and financialization of art has become complete. Whatever assessment there is of significant meaning in de Kooning's work—its innovative merger of modernist influences, skillful draughtsmanship, and expressive existential power—has all been reduced to pure commodity, which is appalling. All creativity and intention, all richness and experience, are steamrolled by the money power, turning art into a dead object.

Neoliberalism's dictum that "there is no alternative"—so richly evident in our politics as much as it is in the art world—has driven both into a rigid kind of stasis where mobility is not possible. Essentially, art world institutional adherence to neoliberal-based market systems has "frozen" the art world in time. Since the mid-1980s, the art market has continually increased the asset values of the same group of high commodity-valued artists. Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons are typical examples. They have been

chosen as the "market winners" by those who stand to profit most by such choices, which is why their increasing asset value is preserved and sustained by the same high commodity value dealers and their high commodity value-purchasing ultra-wealthy clients. In similar fashion, the billionaires and corporations of today—America's 1% oligarchy—have "rigged" the economic system to always serve the same expediency of neoliberal market purposes for those at the top of the economic ladder, guaranteeing either no mobility or downward mobility for the middle and lower classes.

Neoliberalism's purpose is to dehumanize the human subject in the same way it dehumanizes what is considered to be art. In a previous article I wrote for the *New Art Examiner*'s Jan/Feb 2018 issue, "How Neoliberal Economics Impacted Art Education," I discussed how conceptual art, minimalism, and pop art conformed best to neoliberal market demands, with Duchamp, Warhol, and Keith Haring as the most successful models. The often anti-art, anti-aesthetic, and anti-human basis of their work accords perfectly with the neoliberal belief in the atomized self and mass culture. This extends to Koons' pop culture kitsch for the rich as much as it does to the deskilled Readymade, ripe for instant "sensationalized" market appeal: Maurizio Cattelan's banana taped to a wall, Félix González-Torres' pile of candy and string of light bulbs, and Damien Hirst's animal vitrines and diamond skull. These Readymades emphatically prove that the very nihilism behind neoliberal ideology—of reducing art to its most alienated and dehumanized form—can be successfully packaged and monetized ad nauseum.

Neoliberalism also reformulates modernist abstraction as "decorative" market-ready design, evident in the vast quantities of "Zombie Formalism" or "crapstraction" on view. There is no need to work through the subjective or spiritual struggles with abstraction the way Kandinsky, Mondrian, Rothko, or Barnett Newman did in the search for meaningful new forms. One need only appropriate their signature styles to sell pleasing designs for hanging in corporate halls and on apartment walls.

A critical component of the neoliberal ideological formula is to promote art that conforms to mass entertainment and spectacle—a perfect fit for a model based on the atomization of its audience and the commercial market supremacy of its values. This is why sensationalism and novelty are rigorously applied as formulas for generating a mill of new markets and sales for over 40 years now. Like the never-ending stream of commerce in fashion, art depends on quickly cycling through endless modes of novelty and entertainment to keep its market engine going, swapping what was formerly a culture-engaged audience for a mass-based one.

It is significant that neoliberalism has led to a profound ahistoricism about art—even going so far as to be anti-historical, anti-intellectual, and anti-interpretive. This is necessary because neoliberal ideology demands the era-

Jeff Koons, *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Dr. J Silver Series)*, 1985. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Jackson Pollock. *Untitled,* 1944-45, printed 1967. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene V. Thaw in honor of Harold Joachim's 60th birthday. © 2018 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

sure of all consciousness of alternative ways culture, society and politics had existed previously and may be conceived of in the future. True critical, historical, social, and cultural consciousness poses one the gravest of threats to neoliberalism's order precisely because it has the power to dismantle its dictum, "There is no alternative." Donald Kuspit's recent 2019 essay "Thinking About Art and the Art Critic's Situation" talks about this problem

> *One needs ideas to think about art—certainly to be able to interpret and evaluate it with critical acumen and, more broadly, to educate one's sensibility, enabling one to attune to it responsibly.... No one can be a responsible art critic—let alone properly responsive to a work of art—without knowledge of the history of ideas, the history of art and culture, and some understanding of human psychology... [C]ritical consciousness does not spontaneously spring from one's head the way Athena sprang from the head of Zeus, but must be deliberately cultivated—and constantly renewed...*
>
> *Now, on a practical level, it is hard to write art criticism, especially art criticism that explores art in depth, and that reaches a large public, typically by way of art magazines...*
>
> *The contemporary critic is thus in a dubious position, not to say dire situation: his critical consciousness—the knowledge and sensitivity he can bring to bear on the art—is constrained by the demands of the market, at least if he wants to get a hearing from 'the people who count,' the people in power in the art world, often enough the people with money... the Midas touch of superrich collectors turns it [art] into spiritless, lifeless gold. The Midas touch is self-defeating, for it devalues art by absurdly overvaluing it...*
>
> *[C]ritical consciousness is on the verge of being stamped out by economic consciousness.*[12]

Abolishing the past and denying there is no alternative for the future means we are forced to be stuck in an eternal present. Mass entertainment demands attention to a never-ending present: the next program in the serial, the next major league football game, the next blockbuster movie, or the next new art "sensation."

There is also the incessant skewing and revising of historical significance tailored to the prominence of an artworks' financialized value. Art that has passed the "market" test makes it into art history books and magazines—revising the history of contemporary art to be a history of markets. The erasure of historical consciousness is necessary to maintain the neoliberal "spell" of ever-escalating auction prices, which in turn establish the meaning of money values in the writing of contemporary art history. "There is no alternative," like a shaman's chant, guarantees endlessly escalating value for de Kooning paintings as much as it does for Manhattan apartments and corporate stock buybacks. For the 1%, the illusion of art's commodity value cannot be allowed to fail, the spell must not be broken, the security of their wealth holdings must be guaranteed because "there is no alternative" to the eternal present.

Yet the most damaging aspect of the neoliberal economic model—one that led to the subverting of all the aforementioned human values—is its full-frontal attack on the existence of alternative economic systems. This includes censoring consciousness and historical knowledge about Keynesian, socialist, democratic socialist, or communist economic systems as they existed in the past. This has allowed financial elites to continually attacked and dismantle the New Deal reforms on which the vast majority still depend. They vilified the New Deal as "Stalinist authoritarianism" in 1937 in precisely the same way that the right-wing media does today. It is precisely because of the great success of the New Deal to redistribute wealth, creating the largest and most wealthy middle class in the history of the world, that its memory remains the greatest threat to the neoliberal order.

Any remnant of the human, social and political factors critical to the formation of the abstract expressionist movement 80 years ago has been severely diminished if not outright destroyed by neoliberalism's order—in particular, its social democratic economic foundation through the New Deal and its rich social networks with European expatriates, writers, and critics Greenberg and Rosenberg, as well as historically engaged art curators and dealers like Katharine Kuh and Betty Parsons, who were willing to believe in an art that had little monetary value and no market when they supported it.

The abolition of all these elements, and their displacement with a system based on atomization and alienation, is what I believe is really is meant when scholars and writers talk about the "end of art."

Fortunately, today we are finally experiencing social uprisings and organic forms of spontaneous organizing that militate against the nihilism and despair of 40 years of neoliberalism. Wendy Brown describes the two critical

elements neoliberalism attempted to destroy and which current social movements are reasserting in the public sphere:

> *[We] have eliminated two important things... We've eliminated the domain where we actually live together in a world... But we've also eliminated the space where thinkers like Marx and like other social theorists of equality and inequality identify the powers that subject some groups, elevate others, exclude or marginalize. We have eliminated from our view the very space where racism, sexism and of course class operate.*[13]

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic collapse has, more than anything, proven *society does exist* and that *we do live together*. Our mutual dependence on each other is critical to our survival in the face of a society and government that have been appropriated by neoliberal market forces. The crisis has shown that people will react and fight back if they are forced to live as atomized cogs in a vast market system that casts them aside when their "asset value" becomes negligible. Social organizing, rent strikes, workers strikes, mutual aid, and massive protest movements are all proof that in spite of 40 years of brainwashing, society still exists. The most important and historic social movement of our time is the Black Lives Matter protest movement—an organic and spontaneous uprising that formed in reaction to racist police murders and rampant inequality. Now the existence of the "social" reasserts itself as a powerful force, shown by the interracial solidarity between whites and people of color.

Neoliberalism's attempt to erase historical consciousness is starting to lose its hold. Bernie Sander's runs for the presidency based on a democratic socialist platform in 2016 and 2020 organized an active movement educated in progressive and socialist history that has long been suppressed. Activists are determined to dismantle the neoliberal order—to *de-commodify* the criminal justice system, policing, healthcare, housing, education, and the environment. Now there is talk of universal basic income, Medicare-For-All, canceling student debt, free public universities and colleges, and a Green New Deal jobs program, all of which threaten to break neoliberalism's authoritarian "spell." While the ever-escalating stock market, Mitch McConnell, and billionaires cry out, "There is no alternative," millions in the streets yell, "Another world is possible!" ■

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Mark Rothko (Marcus Rothkowitz). *Untitled (Purple, White, and Red)*, 1953. Gift of Sigmund E. Edelstone. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Diane Thodos is an artist and art critic who lives in Evanston, Illinois. She is the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Grant in 2002 and is a student of Jackson Pollock's teacher, Stanley William Hayter. Her art has been exhibited and collected internationally in museums and galleries in New York, Germany, France, Mexico, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee. Her work is most deeply informed by the Modernist art movements of German expressionism and American abstract expressionism. For more information visit *www.dianethodos.com*

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COVID-19 and the Creative Process(es)

Two Final Interviews from Chicago—Introduction

Six months ago, the rapid spread of the COIVD-19 global pandemic seemed like the definitive issue of 2020. There was no way to predict that a national and even international rise of civil disobedience and social disruption in response to systemic racism would overpower the fear and necessity of quarantine. But it justifiably and rightly has and will continue to do so. Less shocking but still disturbing is the further descent into authoritarian reactionism on the part of the administration and its enablers in the government and national media. In spite of this, I have to confess I was struck with a greater sense of fear and anxiety back at the end of March when cities began to rapidly shut down and people started losing their jobs. The fear had less to do with my health and financial well-being than with something broader. The media was abuzz with talk of looming death tolls and economic decline, and though these are relevant and practical concerns, it was what was not being discussed that worried me. I imagined all the things that would slip through the cracks; the poor and marginalized, a shared sense of safety and community, culture itself, and all the harmful actions of a regime that so many had been openly fighting without the hurdle of quarantine. For anyone who had ever mused about the coming of a second dark age, it felt as though it had arrived.

This fear was only amplified by the narrow public discourse around the crisis of the pandemic. I know that in such an emergency, it is most important to keep people informed about how to stay healthy. But the questions of what culture could do and how it might change lingered in my mind. So, I decided to search for answers by reaching out to members of Chicago's large and diverse arts community. We had long conversations with our seven interviewees (Quenna Barrett, Jessica Campbell, Stevie Hanley, Patric McCoy, Jessica Stockholder, Lori Waxman, and Carlos Flores) that were commiserative, uplifting, cathartic, contemplative, and informative. It was not only restorative to simply just connect with people but refreshing to hear from folks who think critically about the world on a daily basis. Though things are changing and have changed a great deal since these conversations took place, it is my hope that they can continue to provide relief, comfort, insight, and inspiration as we move forward into uncertain times. I know I found these discussions helpful, and if you are reading this, I hope you do as well.

Evan Carter

Carlos Flores

Carlos Flores (b. 1992, Guadalajara, Mexico) is a multidisciplinary artist and organizer working primarily in sculpture, collaborative installations, and community building. His work is informed by his experience as a queer Latinx immigrant on the West Side of Chicago and brings viewers face-to-face with issues of displacement, class, gender, and race. In addition to this work, Carlos is the General Manager at Chicago Art Department (CAD), a nonprofit community art center in Pilsen offering residencies for twenty artists and over a hundred free programs to the community per year. He is committed to cultivating socially minded artists.

Jessica Campbell

Jessica Campbell is a Canadian visual artist and cartoonist currently based in the Midwest, working in comics, fibers, painting, and drawing. She has had previous solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, IL); Western Exhibitions (Chicago, IL); and Laroche/Joncas (Montreal, QC), in addition to other institutions. She has been included in group exhibitions at the Hamilton Art Gallery (Hamilton, ON); the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) Baltimore (Baltimore, MD); Monique Meloche (Chicago, IL); Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University (Sackville, NB), and others. She is the author of the graphic novels *Hot or Not: 20th-Century Male Artists* (2016) and *XTC69* (2018), both published by Koyama Press. Campbell has a BFA from Concordia University (Montreal, QC) and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Shelby Rodeffer, *We Will Figure It Out*, 2020. Mural in front of Chicago Art Department at 1932 S. Halsted Ave., Chicago, Illinois. Photo by Marta Sasinowska.

Carlos Flores

New Art Examiner: How are you handling the whole social distancing/lockdown situation?

Carlos Flores: Work at CAD [Chicago Art Department] is very social and dependent on sharing space and community with other people, so space is really important and will continue to be. Outside of work, I mostly keep to myself, so it hasn't been too different on a personal level. I also like to bike to work, so it's not like I'm taking public transit. I haven't felt those kind of changes.

There have been a lot of changes as there have been for everyone, but things have stayed close to what they were pre-coronavirus. I've been doing good. I've been doing a lot more, like, outdoor activities. I've always been a fan of the outdoors, but I've taken up mushroom foraging. That's been helping me get out of my regular headspace and relax.

NAE: Are you still actively working at Chicago Art Department, or are they closed?

CF: Actually, we have remained open to our residents. We have had to put a lot of exhibitions and programming on hold and cancel a few of them. Per my executive director, Mike Norris, his instructions have been, "You don't have to come to work," but honestly, I've been a little bored. So I'm coming in consistently wearing a mask. We put up signage. We have 17 resident artists, most of whom continue to come in. A lot of them have been affected by the changes and losing a lot of opportunities, but at least half of them are still coming in.

On our end, it's been a bit slower as far as programming and events, but there's been a shift to actively seek new funding because of the losses of revenue that we would have had from events. We had to postpone a fundraiser that was actually supposed to happen on the 16th a few days ago. We are celebrating 16 years old being here in Pilsen, and that was going to be a celebration—but also our biggest planned fundraiser for the year.

NAE: What other funding resources are you looking to as an alternative? Is it, like, mostly grants?

CF: So far, we received good news of continued funding from the Reva and David Logan Foundation. They are giving us the opportunity to seek funding for a second paid staff position for development. We haven't had someone dedicated solely to development before, so that will be a gamechanger, hopefully. We are hoping to maintain current funding, but as many other small nonprofits are right now, we are going after relief funding. So far we have gotten two relief opportunities, and we also got the PPP loan from the government.

We're having our rent go up a little bit, so we are specifically going after new money so that we can cover overhead cost.

NAE: How are you and other artists you know reacting to this crisis, and what do you think is being lost for the arts community as well as the local community?

CF: The effects are pretty substantial. Last year we organized over a hundred and fifty free events for the community, including exhibitions, resident-led workshops, and other community events. The arts community is losing a lot of that community building. There is already a strong sense of connection here, and people have transitioned to digital venues, but at the same time, people are quickly burning out and realizing nothing beat sharing physical space—and us being really dependent on space, having three exhibitions for up to twenty resident studio artists. People miss that connection. I personally believe that sharing space or a platform is an empowerment for

A work from "Tirar Y Soltar" by Macus Alonso, shown at the Chicago Art Department in May and June of 2020.

everyone, for anyone. We work with a lot with POC artists. We also share our spaces with the people in the Pilsen community who can't afford or don't have access to space for events. Everyone is taking a hit in that sense.

NAE: It seems like your practice is so much about space and interaction. Would you say in your own practice that you are facing new challenges artistically?

And what kind of, like, creative solutions have you come up with? Are you thinking differently about your own practice—about new forms, anything like that?

CF: Community building is at the center of my practice. That's been put on hold for the time being out of, like, limitations from public health guidelines. It's been a bit of a rush. My work has taken over my art practice in just the past three months, at first from just the initial scrambling, canceling of events, and overseeing so many events here that we needed to postpone or cancel. Both on the end of being with community and organizing work, but also, like, the wave of added work from having to shift gears from my work here at CAD. I've been kind of a bad artist in the last couple months just from that.

I'm honestly still in the phase where I'm, like, wondering how to evolve my work. One thing that we did recently, we painted a mural on Halsted. It was covered by Block Club Chicago. Essentially, every opportunity becomes important, and as an arts administrator, but also as an artist, I'm aware of, like, my influence to create opportunities but also to be responsive to all that is happening right now. So one example is that mural. We have a resident artist, her name is Shelby Rodeffer—[she's] a sign painter and muralist. I saw the opportunity to work with her and put out a message via the mural to, at the very least, inspire people and express a little solidarity with all that is happening. The mural reads, "We will figure it out. Aqui Juntos." Which translates to "here together" in Spanish.

I guess overall, to answer your question, there is a lot of uncertainty. I've also lost several opportunities that I had coming up. So I'm still in the re-thinking phase. Not discouraged at all.

NAE: Just one more thing on that topic. Would you say that your own artistic practice was very much tied to your position at CAD, or do you see them as separate entities?

CF: The more I think about it, the more I see an overlapping connection, but what I've always loved about this position is again, my role in creating culture and creating opportunities for other artists and especially considering myself a socially focused artist cultivating activity for other socially focused artists as well. The more I think about it, the more I see my position as an extension of my practice.

A work from "Tirar Y Soltar" by Macus Alonso, shown at the Chicago Art Department in May and June of 2020.

NAE: You are a very deep thinker about culture. It says on your website that your work deals with displacement, class, and gender. Zooming out from local culture, how are you thinking about, like, the larger cultural context that we're and the condition of the moment right now?

CF: Well, I think a lot of weaknesses are coming to the surface. The virus is putting a lot of strain on what was visibly or invisibly not working. All that was weak is breaking with a strain on it right now. They are being foregrounded as things that need to be addressed and looked at. I mean that generally. I could give you twenty examples of that.

One thing is just, like, how much public spaces and art spaces are connected to public health. There is this big need to shift funding to arts, because art is what brings us all together, and it's crucial to community building and getting people into healthy headspaces. I mean, right now, we're all hyper-relying on the arts and entertainment, whether it's film [and] movies or virtual museum tours. It's evident now more than ever that the arts are important, but also a lot of arts organizations [are] losing funding [because they're] tied to a weak, fragile connection to money. So that needs to change. I think more money needs to go into the arts because of that weak connection.

A work from "Tirar Y Soltar" by Macus Alonso, shown at the Chicago Art Department in May and June of 2020.

Something positive that is coming to the surface as well, and I'm thinking of CAD... is that we have a really strong community of artists that are very communicative and very together. Every resident here is very connected to other communities in their own kind of mini-ecosystem. It's kind of reassuring that artists here are very connected. We may have a monthly Zoom meeting, and we continue to have, like, a strong following. We've received support on social media and an increase in followers and supporters.

Recently we had an exhibition I actually curated for one of our resident artists. Having canceled the fundraiser we had planned for May and putting the other shows on hold, I decided to curate an exhibition here showcasing a resident artist's work. It was her first solo exhibition. Her name is Macus Alonso. We decided to make this a curbside and virtual exhibition. I didn't want to make this entirely virtual, because there is so much already that is virtual, and people are honestly tired already of just solely experiencing work digitally. What curbside means is that we shifted focus from artwork being entirely on the walls to some of it being on the windows, and to coincide with that concept, we planned workshops and talks that happened in the storefront as well. So, people passing by who are in the area can look at the work almost as if they were in the gallery space. Of course, we are taking all precautions, and we are offering gallery visits by appointment with the artist. It's one artist at a time and they both have to wear masks. We're just slowly trying to go back to normal, being mindful of safety of course.

NAE: The way we experience art is definitely changing. How do you think that experience is going to carry over into the future? I know it's all hypothetical, but do you think the way the public engages with art will have a lasting positive or negative change?

CF: I think will be multifaceted. People are embracing digital venues, so that's going to carry over for a while. But also, at the same time, again, people are realizing that nothing beats physical space and experiencing work in person. So I think that smaller art venues and galleries, places where more intimate sharing takes place, will also grow, become more important, and people will realize the importance of small art spaces.

I think for museums and larger institutions, it's going to take a little longer for them to get back to where they were just looking at numbers and exposure to hundreds of people at the same time. I think small art galleries are going to grow, and in that growth, their influence is going to be much stronger, and they are going to hold a stronger role in communities.

NAE: Yeah, that's something we can hope for—that people will have a greater sense of value in the future and

Installation view of "Tirar Y Soltar" by Macus Alonso, shown at the Chicago Art Department in May and June of 2020.

there will be more public engagement from a wider audience. But we'll see.

CF: It's been small community organizations for the most part that have been the biggest advocates for all kinds of, like, mutual aid campaigns, organizing, and pulling funds to help people that are going through unfortunate things right now. At least that has been my experience. I think all of that is coming to the surface, but also, [in regard to] art museums, I used to work for the Adler Planetarium, so I am quite familiar with the museum and exhibitions world, and I just found out that the Adler is letting go of a hundred and fifty people. That comes to mind in this moment because in a lot of the larger galleries, museums, and institutions, there is a lot of bureaucracy, and I know that myself having been an Adler employee, so I think larger places like that are limited in their actions and what they can do and how they can help communities. Bringing it back to smaller organizations like CAC [Chicago Artists Coalition] or CAD, especially just because I happen to be the voice right now of CAD... I can tell you directly that there is much less bureaucracy here, and we are much more able to shift our funds [and] be a lot more flexible to help artists and also create opportunities for them. We're currently working on relocating money so that we can support ten mural artists in Pilsen and give them small microgrants. It speaks to, hopefully, small art organizations becoming stronger as people realize that it's the small nonprofits that are really helping people the most.

NAE: Are there any other outside creative projects that you sort of found inspiration or solace in?

CF: I found really helpful a few artists talks [and] virtual works out from Creative Capital. A few artists that I follow on social media... are making flyers and screenprinting work that is related to the whole situation right now. A lot of people are still in the figuring out stage. We would need maybe a couple more weeks or even a few more months to see [what happens].

NAE: A lot of things are being revealed in the crisis, whether they were visible or invisible before. I think those of us who are engaged in the art community are maybe already aware of a lot of the issues, but do you think or do you see a lot of these less visible issues emerging on a more public level? Or have things stayed the same?

CF: I think both... As an art administrator, I'm just now finding out that I don't think most of the public is aware of, but there are also larger issues that are coming to the surface that most people are finding out about. One example is that there was this planned demolition of the old coal power plant chimney in Little Village. Essentially, during a public health, breathing crisis, they decided to demolish this giant coal plant chimney in the middle of a pandemic that release[d] a giant front of chemicals that covered all of Little Village and even Back of the Yards and Pilsen. So that comes to mind as an example of how desensitized the government is to everything that is happening. Little Village happens to be one of the most affected areas by [case] numbers right now, so that to me was pretty appalling. This was something that was public that a lot of people responded to and are aware of now. It shows a lack of fine-tuning in politics right now. I think the protesters ended up going to the mayor's house over the weekend and had a small little rally there. I think they had done something with a contractor's permit, but now that whole thing is on hold because they went to her house to demand justice because it's just crazy.

NAE: Just so I understand, they did go through with the demolition?

CF: As of now, finally, the [full] demolition is on hold. The mayor gave really vague reasoning for it. But after the demolition [of the chimney] and the cloud of smoke, the mayor did have some investigators look into the chemicals that were in the air, and it turned out to be, according to them, nothing toxic. Although you really have to wonder, what is the integrity of that? It was a city run investigation, and it was dust—I mean, any kind of dust is toxic.

NAE: Yes, I always thought whenever a building is demolished the dust is inherently harmful.

CF: Especially during [a] respiratory crisis. I think at that point, after the investigation, I think they gave HILCO, the corporation funding this, permission to continue. So it took the protesters going to her house to finally have her put more of a solid hold on the project. So I believe that's where it is now in the hope for these communities that it doesn't continue. The whole thing is also to bring in a shipping company that was [going to] increase air pollution significantly. It would be a shipping center. Aside from the disinvestment in the area, it is just unacceptable to hit a community so many different ways.

NAE: This is a really important story, and it's so similar to things we've been seeing play out on the national level for the past couple years, particularly with people becoming more aware of air quality in marginalized/disinvested communities. It's something that this virus is bringing more attention to, and I think people are going to have to do a lot of work to get government action, but it's good to hear that people in the Little Village area decided to take action.

Is there anything else that you want to share that you think needs to be discussed or that isn't being discussed enough?

CF: I just want to reiterate the importance of moments like these, because socially minded artists are kind of at the center of attention because of their intrinsic ability to connect with people and unify people. They go strictly to the center of problems to address those issues and organize around those issues, so I think there might be a shift in socially minded work coming from this cultural moment.

NAE: Yes. There's been such a convergence between creative practice and community-building and then socially engaged creative problem solving. And this moment could really reinforce that and drive that aspect of artistic practice into new territory that is potentially more potent [and] more substantive.

On a lighter note, have you taken up any new activities to help you get through this? Is there anything you would like to share that you think people could maybe be inspired by?

CF: Like I said, I've been doing a lot of biking. I've taken up foraging. It hasn't been too successful, but it has really gotten me to, like, decompress and be somewhere else. I think a lot about sustainability. I guess in part, I'm like, "There are so many issues going on in the world." There is kind of a secret drive to get off the grid and sustain myself and if I needed to, just be independent. But mostly it's been just, like, biking around and exploring new natural areas, following streams, foraging for mushrooms. This was actually my first year foraging overall, but especially, like, foraging for morel mushrooms. I was pretty lucky. I was surprised to find my first-ever morel foray, so that was really exciting.

NAE: Nice. If things were to go back to normal or mostly normal, what is the thing that you miss the most that you would want to do right away?

CF: Being with family, like all family at once. Also with friends, and even, like, here, having in-person meetings with all of our artists. I miss those things the most.

NAE: Have you been distant from your family for safety reasons?

CF: Yeah, my parents are in their fifties, and I've been just Skyping them or FaceTiming them. Something else I miss is our family dog that is at my parent's house. Out of anxiety I did feel—I don't know if I was sick, but there were two days where I just felt off. I didn't have a cough or a sore throat, but I did feel kind of feverish, so those anxieties played into me, and they still are making me not want to see them in person out of fear that I might be infecting them or something.

NAE: Absolutely understandable. Thank you so much for speaking with me, Carlos. Stay safe and take care. ■

Two more works from "Tirar Y Soltar" by Macus Alonso, shown at the Chicago Art Department in May and June of 2020.

Jessica Campbell

New Art Examiner: How are you doing in this strange time?

Jessica Campbell: I've been walking a lot. I have a dog. We go for like two and a half hour long walks because why not? Most of my work was really piecemeal kind of freelance stuff, so a lot of that dried up. I've been traveling a lot. I moved to Wisconsin last summer, and since I moved here I've been traveling a lot, going to Chicago or wherever there are gigs—and so that stopped. So this is the longest I have been in Wisconsin since moving here, which is interesting.

I've always, always, always had a day job up until being in Wisconsin, where I've just been piecing things together. It's very much like I'm just kind of unemployed now, I've had work. I had an essay project, and I'm working on a book right now. I have a tiny advance for that, but it's not very much.

NAE: Is this a graphic novel you are working on?

JC: Yes, it's a graphic novel. And I've had exhibitions, but they're all kind of indefinitely postponed. There are some that are years in the future, so I could be working on that, but I don't know, it's been strange. My husband and I, we have a house here that has a commercial space in it, and so we are opening a gallery and bookstore. It was supposed to open on April 10th, but that didn't happen, of course. There is some work to do at that space, but it also feels like a lot of that urgency is gone because we really have no clue when it'll actually open.

NAE: That's exciting though.

JC: Yes, it's the perfect thing to work on right now. I'm sanding the floors. I didn't work on it today, but we have to sand the floors down and oil them and do all this manual labor stuff that is mindless but productive. And so that's been cool.

NAE: So you said you've been traveling a lot. Have you been traveling while these social distancing and lockdown things [have] been happening?

JC: Oh no. Up until then and since we moved. When social distancing started, I had three visiting artist trips planned to go to different universities. One was in town and two trips were out of town. They were all indefinitely postponed or canceled. Yeah. It's a bummer. I mean, I don't know. I feel like the kind of work that I've lost is really typical. Everyone I've talked to has lost work, or I mean some people are working from home, which is lucky, but I think it would be hard to concentrate working a full-time job from home right now.

Jessica Campbell, *Phoning It In,* 2018, acrylic rug on panel, 60" x 48". Photograph by James Prinz.

NAE: How are you reacting to and thinking about this cultural moment?

JC: Personally, there are things happening in my life and other people's lives that have affected the way I interact with art, kind of immensely. There [are] things like loss of wages, there's the same anxiety about paying rent and how you're going to eat and what's going to happen going forward. Even if you have enough savings to make it through a couple months, what happens when that ends and you need to get a new job? So there's this kind of anxiety, and then there are other things just in my life that have been happening like a family member died, not from corona but I think it impacted the kind of care that he was given in the hospital—and they don't know why he died and they didn't do an autopsy because of corona. No one could visit or anything like that. There's not going to be a memorial service anytime soon. So that's been really painful and difficult, and other people have gone through really similar things, and it's really exacerbated by corona.

And the other thing for me that's been really stressful is immigration. I'm a permanent resident here, and I need to renew my green card, and so Trump's executive order barring people from getting or renewing green cards has been really anxiety-inducing. Since I'm married to an American it might not apply to me, but I'm still not sure what's going to happen. So there are all these things going on that are byproducts of corona that [have] impacted just my life, which of course then impacts my feelings about art, and I find at the moment, it's getting a little

better this week. I'm starting [to] feel normal-ish again but the past few months, my mantra when watching TV or whatever is, I don't want to feel anything. I don't want to feel sad, or I just want to watch stupid action movies or comedies. I don't need to feel anything. I don't want to watch celebrities singing John Lennon or whatever. It's so not appealing to me.

And then all this stuff in the art world with online viewing rooms and stuff—I mean, I understand from a gallery perspective why they're doing that because they need to make money somehow and no one is buying art at the moment. But that also just feels really sad to me. And I don't have art in the Frieze online viewing room, but I have friends who had solo booths at galleries that are now online viewing room. It's already so sad making art for—I should be careful what I say here maybe but—it's already a weird position to be making art that's going to be in an art show because you maybe make something that's only going to be seen in this one venue for 5 days that's basically like a big shopping mall. And then in an ideal world, I guess you sell it and then it's never seen in public ever again. I think that's already a hard or kind of depressing state of affairs, but then making it so that no one's ever going to see it physically, it only appears online, I think that's even more depressing. But you know, it's like we're all teaching classes through Zoom or whatever. I mean everyone's just trying to figure out how to cope.

Jessica Campbell, *Kissing Costume*, 2015, cotton, 80" x 60". Photograph by Robert Chase Heishman and Emily Kay Henson.

Jessica Campbell, *Eating Cheesies Off the Couch*, 2019, acrylic rug on panel, 26" x 24". Photograph by James Prinz.

NAE: As an educator you have had to switch to remote teaching, which must be hard. I've heard teachers saying that students just aren't as engaged.

JC: I have friends who have been talking to me about that, but the thing is the students are also in the middle of a global pandemic—they are also dealing with lost work and family situations and many of them having to leave their on-campus housing. It's just understandable that everyone—[teachers], students, everyone—is distracted at the moment... I think everyone should just kind of go easy on themselves a little bit. Just try to stay alive.

NAE: You had some cartons in the *New Yorker* recently that are prescient in this crisis. But you actually drew them a few years ago?

JC: It's depressingly telling that my pre-pandemic life and pandemic life are nearly identical in a lot of ways.

NAE: Can you talk about the relationship between the text and images in these drawings?

JC: Comics as a medium is a combination of words and pictures, right, and in an ideal world, the way that comics function is that you're getting information from both the images and the text and that they aren't reiterating each

other. So you don't have a picture of a cat that says this is a cat or something like that. That's something I'm really interested in with comics. I made a comic book for my MCA show when it was up last year, and the same sort of thing happened. There are text and images that sort of related [to] and contradicted each other at different times. I think the *New Yorker* piece a little bit simpler than that one. It's just like [the] images from Instagram, and so it's supposed to be kind of just this, you know, this constant scrolling and the experience that I think a lot of us have that you're, like, you're thinking and looking at multiple tabs and scrolling at your phone sort of at the same time. So it's just meant to be representative of that basically.

NAE: Are there any other issues that come to mind for you like people in the world that you know or that aren't getting talked about enough or that you think need to be elevated in the conversation?

JC: Yeah, I think what this has done is really emphasized the need for things like universal health care or Medicare for all as it's being called in the States. Universal basic income would be a solution to a problem like this. We should just have that. And there are countries that are talking about that. I think Canada is talking seriously about implementing that. I think Sweden is talking about it as well. I don't think it will ever happen in the States because people are too conservative here.

NAE: Are there things about the art world being revealed in this crisis that were previously overlooked or not considered?

JC: It does seem like there's a lot of like flailing happening. I think that there are these things that happen where the society that we live in feels natural. It feels like things that are happening happen because it's natural and that's the best way for things [to] operate, even like art fairs or something, right? My experience working in the commercial galleries is that most the galleries' money comes from art fairs rather than the actual exhibitions. Having artists or a visitor to the gallery seemed to be the things that are most important about the gallery. I think even the directors of the gallery, curators, those are the things that they care about the most, but in order to finance the gallery operations, art fairs have become necessary. And it just feels like that's the natural state of things. That's just how things are, and there's no way we can rethink this structure. I think with this crisis art fairs are impossible or they're only possible through these, like, online viewing rooms, which seem super tedious or dorky to me.

It really makes it seem like there is a way for us to envision a different society or a different functioning for art. I think now would be a really good moment to just rethink society. Let's think about things like taking care of everyone's basic needs. Let's just try to make sure that the whole population is housed, like housing for everyone, you know, healthcare for everyone. Free and accessible education. Those seem like the most crucial things. We can talk about prison abolition and police abolition. I don't know, why can't we have those conversations? I suspect, well I guess, I don't know, if this crisis ends in two weeks, I think everything will kind of go back to how it was. But if it keeps going, who knows what will happen? It would be a good time to kind of reevaluate how we live, and how the art world functions.

NAE: When all this is over and things are normal again, what's the thing you want to do the most?

JC: Well, I want to go to a restaurant. I want to eat food that I didn't cook. I don't know. I want to go see my family. I would like to go back to Canada and see my family really badly. There are things just in my life that'd I'd like to do like the visiting artist talks and exhibitions in stuff that I have planned. But mostly it's just like go to restaurants. I really like working in coffee shops too because I do writing as like half my work, or working on a book or whatever, which I can do outside of the house... I find it really helpful to go to a coffee shop and not be in my same space where I am constantly getting distracted and thinking I should do dishes or whatever.

I know. I've been applying but I'm like, is this going to happen? Do residencies exist still? I want to go to a party. That's what I want to do. I want to have a party or go to a party. I really miss parties. ■

Jessica Campbell, *The Welcome Man*, 2018, acrylic rug on panel, 36" x 48". Photograph by James Prinz.

The Łódź Murals:
An Old Alternative for Distributing Art

by Michel Ségard

The summer of 2020 saw increased attention in the United States on public murals as a result of the political turmoil surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. All those murals advocated a particular point of view, mostly promoting the ideology of the BLM movement. In the US, it seems that most murals publicize either a political point of view or a particular ethnicity or social issue. Very few are "just" works of art; the vast majority are advocating a "cause." In the US, this emphasis is largely a legacy of muralist Diego Rivera's highly political stance and content. It has been reinforced by street art that is equally political.

That is not necessarily true in other parts of the world. Most notably, in Łódź, Poland, murals are used as a tool for beautification (and as a tourist attraction for economic revitalization).

Starting in the early 19th century, Łódź (pronounced "woodge") emerged as the center of Poland's textile industry. From this it acquired an artistic sensibility and heritage. Now Łódź is called the capital of Polish street art thanks to the Urban Forms Foundation. This organization was founded in 2009 by art historian Michał Bieżyński and actress Teresa Latuszewska-Syrda. The project has become the Urban Forms Gallery, a permanent street art exhibition in public spaces, mostly consisting of large murals on the sides of buildings. The project has grown to include dozens of murals. The website inyourpocket.com lists 72 with several images of every mural, the artist(s), their creation date, and their locations in the city. New ones are added every year as funds become available and artists are found to offer commissions.

What is startling to American eyes is the lack of overt social or ethnic propaganda in these murals. Most are the individual inspiration of the artist, and many deal with ordinary life issues. There is a similar set of influences as found in the New Leipzig School in Germany and for the same reasons: the sudden release from the authoritarian influence of the Soviet Union under the Polish People's

ARYZ (Spain), *Aryz Mural*, part of the 2012 Urban Forms Festival. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

AweR (Italy), *AweR 3D Mural*, 2018, for the Urban Forms Festival. This is Poland's first 3D mural (and the world's third). You need passive 3D glasses to see the full effect. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

Republic. So, we see murals that have a definite surreal flavor, ones that celebrate the everyday, and others that "rediscover" abstraction and conceptualism. A few murals are left from the Soviet period as a point of comparison. They are mostly large ads for now defunct commercial enterprises.

Some of the murals are assembled from pieces of detritus (broken machinery or crockery and even left-over lumber). This is as close as these murals get to an overt political message—the act of rebuilding their town and culture. And many of the murals have had to be designed around the crumbling portions of the Soviet-era buildings they are meant to beautify.

Artists that have been invited from other countries tend to be more colorful or more abstract in their conception, which adds to the variety. But it is the murals created by Polish artists that end up being the most engaging. What is particularly noteworthy is the personal tone of many of these pieces. Here they are as huge images on the sides of building—yet they present a personal and intimate view of life as seen by the artist. The release from the oppression of the communist regime and centuries of

Bordalo II (Portugal), *Bird Mural*, 2015, for the Urban Forms project. The mural portrays a bird made of junk, from car parts to broken furniture. It is one of the Łódź murals that has a social message about the damage caused to the environment by man and the subsequent impact on endangered animal species of the world. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

Above: Wrocław artist Łukasz Berger, *Cisza* (Silence), 2015. The mural is made using half a ton of nails.
Below: Close-up detail of *Cisza* showing how tonal variety was achieved by inserting the nails at different heights. Photos from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

prior domination by other powers has given the Polish artists the chance to finally sing their own song, not always a happy one, but THEIR song, not someone else's. That is probably the main underlying political message in these murals. It is a message that does not assault you upon first viewing, but that you must thoughtfully coax out of the works as a group.

But there is a paradox in this system of bringing art to the masses. Viewing the work is free to anyone who wants to go see the murals or who happens to pass them by (or anyone who goes online, where they are well documented).

However, these murals are paid for by a foundation that raises money the old-fashioned way—by donations from wealthy supporters and government grants. The main difference is that one does not have to go through a door and pay admission to see the work. Nor is it a temporary one-day-a-week free admission to an otherwise exclusive exhibition venue. In that sense, the Urban Forms Gallery is an alternative way of permanently bringing art to the masses. And it is free of the burden of obligatory and/or overt social, ethnic, religious, or political propaganda.

Designed by two Łódź school children, Martyna Antas and Oliwia Mikołajczak, and made by Sebastian Bożek, Meisal and Ovca, *Reflowering of the Factory*, 2018. It is the first mural in Łódź to be designed by children. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

Surrealism

Many of the murals have a surrealist bent. Like the artists in the New Leipzig School, it is a natural and easy transition from the Soviet socialist realism that dominated before 1989. It also dovetails with the northern European zeitgeist. The murals on this page are two from that group. That aesthetic extends throughout much of Europe. A number of the Łódź murals are by artists from Italy, Spain, and Brazil.

Gregor Gonsior, *Untitled*, 2010. One of several murals by this artist in Łódź. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

ARYZ (Spain) and the Os Gemeos brothers (Brazil), *Untitled*, located at Roosevelta 5, part of the Urban Forms project in 2013. Photo from **the-bravedame.com/street-art-lodz/**

Kobra (Brazil), *Artur Rubenstein*, 2014, for the Urban Forms project. Photo from in-yourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

Polish Themes

There are a number of the Łódź murals that carry Polish themes or commemorate Polish places or personalities. On this page are two murals of famous Polish figures, the pianist Artur Rubenstein and the playwright Janusz Glowacki and a third mural (satirically?) depicting an old Polish woman. The Rubenstein and the old woman murals are humorous and self deprecating and contrast sharply with the serious commemoration of Glwacki.

Andrzej Pągowski, *Janusz Głowacki (*Polish playwright, essayist and screenwriter), 2018. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

The Etam Cru, *Madame Chicken*, 2012, for the Urban Forms project. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

Samuel Szczekacz, *Promised Art*, 2012. The work was carried out by Gregor Gonsior. One of a set of three murals dedicated in honor of the local Łódź avant-garde artist Władysław Strzemiński. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

Abstraction

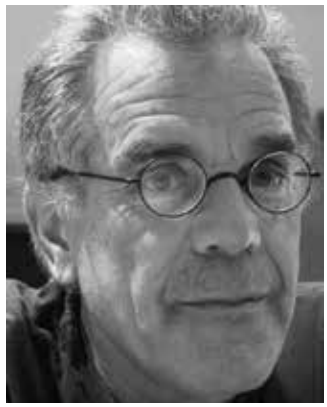
The third mural category that stood out was abstraction, mostly executed by Spanish and Italian artists. These murals are usually very brightly colored and simple in design, contrasting with the conceptual and compositional complexity of many of the murals in the other categories examined. ■

Michel Ségard is the Editor in Chief of the *New Art Examiner* and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also the author of numerous exhibition catalog essays.

Kenor (Spain), *Abstract Mural II*, 2011, for the Urban Forms project. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

Moneyless (Italy), *Untitled*, 2017, part of the Four Cultures Festival. Photo from inyourpocket.com/lodz/street-art/murals.

IN MEMORIAM



Nine Lives: Remembering Paul Klein

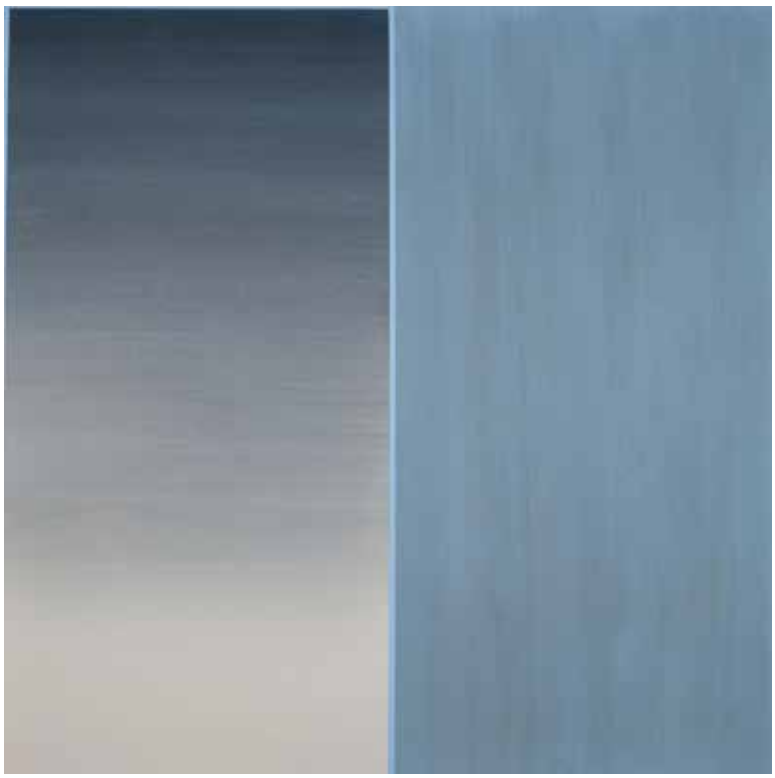
by Neil Goodman

Paul Klein died on October 11th, 2020. Diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 2014, he was initially given six months to live. Through optimism, support, and a strong will, Paul lived an additional five and a half years. He is survived by his wife, Amy Crum, his children, Lucas, Megan and Brice, and his stepdaughter, Iris Kohler.

For those of us who knew him, we might say that Paul was direct, occasionally blunt, yet engaging, curious, challenging, supportive and infinitely generous. Paul occasionally said what you did not want to hear and occasionally said what you really wanted to hear. He loved art and artists, and, most passionately, the community of artists. This connection was at his core and, like his family, defined who he was and how he will be remembered.

For many of us, when we think of Paul, we think of his namesake gallery, Klein Art Works. Opened in 1981, it was originally located within the cluster of galleries on Superior Street. After the devastating gallery district fire in 1989, Paul relocated to May Street, buying and then renovating a former auto repair shop. With vaulted ceilings, a steel-clad floor, and an adjacent sculpture garden, the gallery had a certain kind of New York panache. As a pioneer in the developing Near West Side, the new Klein Art Works quickly became an important fixture of the Chicago gallery world as well as a destination for artists, curators, and collectors.

Klein Art Works was initially known for a strong commitment to well-crafted modernist abstraction with artists of both regional, national, and international reputations. An edited list would include included Sam Gilliam, Jun Kaneko, Robert Stackhouse, Ken Price, Jackie Kazarian, Ed Moses, Tony Berlant, Sabrina Raaf, Steven Heyman,



Dan Ramirez, *The Peacock and the Hawk / El pavo real y el alcón*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 inches. Permanent collection, National Museum of Mexican Art. Photo by Michael Tropea.

Gary Justis, *This is the Thing,*, 2000, Klein Art Works, Chicago. Photo by Paul Klein.

Dan Ramirez, Josh Garber, Susanne Doremus, Miki Lee, Gary Justis, Charles Arnoldi, Michael Kessler, and Lincoln Schatz (to name a few). In this peer context, an exhibition at Klein Art Works was an important milestone as well as a signifier of career recognition for a Chicago-based artist.

In the later years of the gallery, Paul expanded and redirected his focus to include new media and more conceptually based installations. As his interests shifted from the work that had earlier defined his gallery, his collector base did not, and he closed the gallery in 2004. In the course of his career as a gallerist, however, he was well respected for both the quality and consistency of the work exhibited and his support and commitment to the Chicago gallery world.

As one door leads to another, the closing of the gallery was both timely and fortuitous. In 2008, he was commissioned by the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority to curate and orchestrate the art for the recently completed McCormick Place West pavilion at the McCormick Place Convention Center. At more than forty thousand square feet, this was a massive undertaking, as the artwork included commissions, site specific installations, and purchases. The curatorial prospectus under Paul's direction focused inclusively on Illinois- and Chicago-based

Gary Justis, *The Mirror*, 2000, fabric, aluminum, steel, 7 x 2.5 x 2 feet. Photo by Paul Klein.

Nick Cave, *Garden Plot*, 2006, 8 ft. in diameter, found beaded and sequined garments, wood. Photo by James Prinz.

artists. This venture also allowed Paul to parallel his developing interests as well as to commission artists reflective of a broad and diverse base, both aesthetically and culturally. With over fifty works by thirty artists, a segmented list of the participants would include Bernard Williams, Nick Cave, Mary Lou Zelazny, Vera Klement, Preston Jackson, Michiko Itatani, and Sabrina Raaf, amongst many others.

In totality, both McCormick Place West and South (by curator and project manager by Joel Straus in 1998) form one of the largest and most ambitious public collections in the City of Chicago. If Paul's focus was distinctively regional, Joel's approach was more blended in scope. Collectively, however, their mutual achievements created a vibrant, engaging, and accessible portfolio showcasing regional, national, and international artists.

Beginning shortly after the closing of his gallery, Paul initiated a series of online posts entitled "Art Letters." On a weekly basis, Paul reviewed gallery exhibitions, museum exhibitions, and art fairs. As internet posts are timely as opposed to magazine reviews which are published months after an exhibition has closed, his "Art Letters" became the quintessential road map for current exhibitions. With the dispersal of the gallery world into varying districts, this overview was also a very good guide for what to see and where to see it. "Art Letters" also replaced the reduced art criticism which had been a staid part of the weekend edition for both the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*. For many artists, Paul's "Art Letters" were quite often an exhibition's only review, and for many young artists, per-

Vera Klement, *Birds Over Lake Michigan*, 2006, 3 panels, total dimension: 107 x 88", material: oil, wax on canvas. Photo by Tom VanEynde.

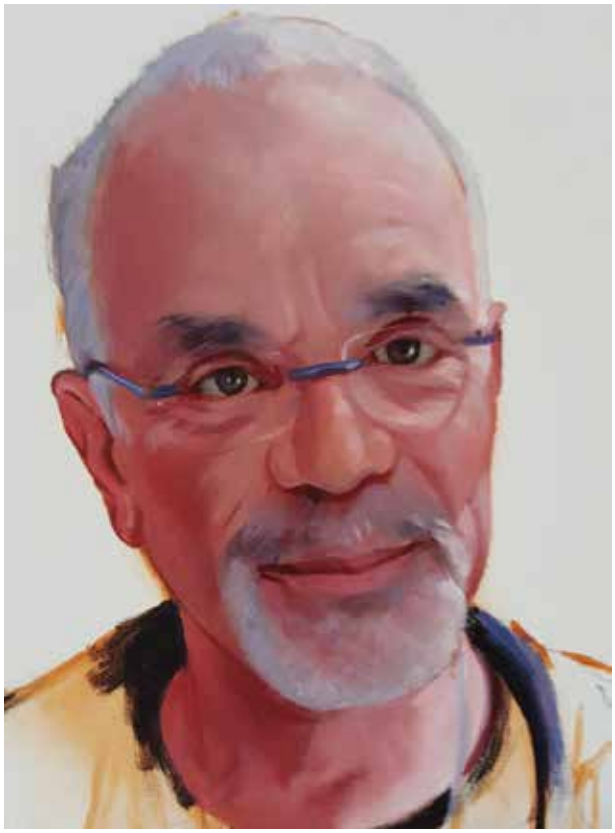
Mary Lou Zelazny, *I ❤ I Go*, 2007, acrylic, acrylic on paper on canvas, 8'11" x 7'4". Photo courtesy of the artist.

haps their first review. Although "Art Letters" was in some sense rogue for its time as a self-published online journal, it became an important part of the gallery world and functioned as both a critique and a roadmap for those interested in contemporary art.

In conjunction with and independent of "Art Letters," Paul formed "Klein Artist Works" as a for-profit tutorial for artistic career development. With an accompanying book *The Art Rules* published in 2015, the course was a definitive navigational handbook of the art world. If art schools developed aesthetics, Paul's course developed careers. Through numerous interviews, discussions, and studio visits, Paul initiated the uninitiated, providing the skills and tools to negotiate and navigate an uncertain and highly competitive terrain. When viewing the online site for "Klein Art Works," there is also an amazingly amount of remaining information posted publicly which gives a very definitive picture of the scope and depth of his course. These include interviews by artist, dealers, collectors, consultants, curators, writers, and business advocates. Collectively, this is a comprehensive and profound oral history, and with the multitudes of posted interviews and discussions, a powerful record of our time.

If we return to the broader question regarding the value of a "traditional" artistic education, we might be well served to look at "Klein Artist Works" as an inventive model for the future, and with his blend of pragmatism and poetics, a valuable resource for those developing and pursuing their dreams of financial and artistic success. For many artists in the Chicago art world and beyond, he both opened a door and taught another generation how to walk through it. Paul used his vast experience in offering guidance and direction to artists at various points

Michiko Itatani, *Lake Effect*, 2007. Painting from *Infinite Vision IV-1*, oil on canvas, 107 x 88 x 4 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Carol Pylant, *Paul Klein*, 2016, oil on panel.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

in their careers. This nuts-and-bolts attitude helped his students learn the tools of the trade, and his course was quintessential Paul. His approach was direct and honest, simultaneously nurturing and encouraging, while teaching that you get further with a clear path and a defined destination.

In many ways, "Klein Art Works" embodied a certain nostalgia for many of us who came of age in the '80s and the '90s. Alternative spaces were intermingled with for-profit galleries, and the emerging art world in Chicago seemed at the brink of establishing itself as an important art center, second only to New York. As art communities are most often generational, the closing of the gallery signified a change of guard. New galleries moved into the forefront, and other interests became more topical. As we look back on our time, we see that many of these artists that Paul represented as well as many galleries of that generation were at the apex of a shifting cultural landscape.

Writing a memoir is both a privilege and a responsibility, as a life's work is recounted, and for the brief time that you read it, their presence is felt. Each memory is specific to that person, yet collectively the loss is felt and echoes throughout their community. A person's accomplishments are, however, public, and in that respect, we recount who they were and the impact they made. With Paul, his trajectory was constantly moving forward, and if opportunities were lost, they were found again, as he remained active, vital, and engaged in spite of declining health. This determination seemed to characterize Paul, defining him both personally and publicly.

As one tends to remember beginnings and endings, I remember the last time I saw Paul. I had known Paul for more than thirty years, and I knew his health was declining and that his future was uncertain. I invited Paul to my studio, probably knowing that this was our last time together. I was preparing for a retrospective in Denver and had recently completed a series of large-scale fiberglass sculptures for the exhibition. He looked at one of the works and, with his direct Paul Klein candor, stated that I had "really accomplished something!"

In retrospect, I would like to reverse the compliment, and like many of us, say it the other way: "Paul, you really accomplished something!"

Paul will be missed, his presence will be felt, his contributions will echo, and in a life well lived, our thoughts are with his family and his wife Amy. ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the Los Angeles correspondent for the *New Art Examiner*.

REVIEWS

These Precedented Times:
Ongoingness in the Los Angeles Piñata District through Dulce Soledad Ibarra's "9th to Olympic"

by Benjamin Nicholson

This has all happened before and, should we survive, it will all happen again. At the time of this writing, it has been one full year to the day since symptoms of what has come to be known as COVID-19 were first observed in Wuhan, China. (and, likely, longer since the virus found a way to replicate in the human body.) Of course, the virus did not remain in place, but has proven to be as ubiquitous as human domesticity; wherever people live, there is illness.

Since the closing of 2019, a litany of terms, concepts, and phrases has entered into our daily lexicon: social distancing, viral load, stay-at-home order, Zoom, essential worker, infection rate, stimulus check, comorbidity, anti-masker, Anthony Fauci, and so on. The aforementioned and various linguistic elements have often been organized under the umbrella of "these unprecedented times," as though the utterance of such words might alleviate the social, political, and economic fissures exposed and exacerbated by the virus. Yet pandemics are neither new nor surprising, though their particular moments of onset and geographies of occurrence are often unpredictable. To qualify a pandemic as 'unprecedented' is to suggest that predictability, stability, and security are themselves dependable; such a belief is a delusion, a myth propagated by those with power they wish to maintain (and to discourage others from challenging the maintenance of that power). Of course, all ways of being are provisional and precarious, though some live with a greater awareness of this than others. And it is in Los Angeles' vibrant Piñata District that visual and performance artist Dulce Soledad Ibarra locates their investigations of ongoingness, the maintenance of social forms in response to emerging circumstances amidst continual change and uncertainty.

The Piñata District, located on Olympic Boulevard in downtown Los Angeles, was until recently known for its daily gatherings of commerce and sociality, when the street would be covered from corner to corner with vendors selling food and wares, mostly Mexican immigrants

SOBREVIVIENTES, April 2020. Credit: Dulce Soledad Ibarra.

María doll earrings; *La Mexicanita en LA Party Supply*, 2020. Credit: Dulce Soledad Ibarra.

collaborating in a carefully-negotiated use of space and infrastructure. A common refrain I have heard from folks who have spent significant time south of the U.S. border is that, amidst familiar voices and forms, the Piñata District "felt like being in Mexico."

This is to say that, prior to the incursions of COVID-19 in early 2020, the social and cultural affinities of a once and/or ancestral home could be encountered in the midst of a country that has not traditionally been kind or gentle to those who have come to live from elsewhere, particularly from Mexico and Central America under the xenophobic regime of Donald Trump. For many Angelinos, the Piñata District represented the resilience and phenomenological vitality (the colors, the smells, the sounds) of a way of being maintained and nurtured against the stifling pressures of economic precarity.

In addition to hosting daily street gatherings, the Piñata District also serves as residence for a collection of party supply stores, known particularly for their original and custom crafted piñatas (some designed and sold by *piñateros*, others imported directly from Mexico).

Prior to the virus, Ibarra, whose artistic practice is deeply invested in a queer Xicanx perspective and is concerned with the confluence of generational guilt and cultural identity, planned to develop a site-specific partnership with the piñateros and laborers on Olympic to celebrate and draw financial support for their commercial artistry as well as to help establish the Piñata District as a space for other artistic interventions. Presciently focused on the ingenuity required to persist in places that offer little external support and sometime proactively seek to undermine livelihoods, Ibarra titled this work "9th to Olympic" with a focus on the word *sobrevivientes*, or "survivors" in English, in homage to the collective efforts of ongoingness within the Mexican community in Los Angeles. Ibarra hoped that the partnership with the workers would lead to continued

The art of papier-mâché, piñatas in the making; Carrusel Party Supplies, 2020. Credit: Dulce Soledad Ibarra.

"9th to Olympic" (installation); University of Southern California (USC) Roski Graduate Gallery, August 2020. Credit: Dulce Soledad Ibarra.

critical creative engagements at the intersections of economics, aesthetics, and sociality, flattening conventional hierarchies of where and how art should be experienced (and by whom).

And then, of course, enter COVID-19.

In the autumn and winter of 2019, Ibarra was making regular trips to the Piñata District to become acquainted with the local vendors and patrons, eager to establish ties that might reveal how best to instantiate a relational art practice in affinity with the place and its ways of being. Ibarra considered inviting friends who might not have otherwise made the trip to spend time and money in the Piñata District, with Ibarra imagining that they might open a street booth of their own that both reflected the spirit of the area and gestured outward, suggesting a bridge across cultural difference that might yield an intermingling of people who often occupied separate silos within the city.

However, by March of 2020, it became clear that the situation was changing; stay-at-home orders and "non-essential" business closures turned the Piñata District into a ghost town almost overnight. Storefronts were shuttered, sidewalks were emptied, and the daily gatherings ceased to materialize, leaving Ibarra to wonder what would become not only of the space they had discovered as a site of nurture amidst existential threat, but also of the people whose ability to "stay at home" was contingent on being able to earn an income. Further, it was unclear how "9th to Olympic" might continue, or whether it was appropriate to pursue such a project in collaboration with those whose livelihoods were so strained. Through their art practice, Ibarra found themself at the struggling heart of a pandemic within a neoliberal society, where sustaining corporate profits was of greater import than keeping people alive.

Yet much like the piñateros and vendors they had met and begun to know, Ibarra felt that it would be a betrayal of the resourcefulness they had witnessed to assume that their partners would be unable to find a new way forward; for many of those in the Piñata District, improvisation, adaptation, and reimagination were core tenets of survival—the pandemic, despite its severity, was not unprecedented in its effects (in continuum with onerous city ordinances which target marginalized businesses, the abhorrent difficulty of securing healthcare in the U.S., and ICE incursions). Ibarra was committed to seeing their partnership through, even if it required significant changes and reconfigurations.

The first difficulty was reestablishing contact with the party supply stores, as previously Ibarra would simply walk through their doors and speak with them. Few of the shops had an online presence and, given that most business had been conducted in-person, phone calls were largely unanswered. It became apparent that the corporate expectations of a world facilitated by Zoom communication were not penetrating communities with more

embodied socialities. Ibarra realized that if the extant geography of the Piñata District was no longer accessible, then perhaps that geography could be extended, physically and virtually.

By partnering directly with the piñateros to employ their skill and labor, Ibarra produced a collection of alphabetic piñatas for display in a gallery in L.A.'s Arts District, offering Internet tours of the installation and selling individual letters for variable pricing between $30 and $60 (with $25 going to the piñateros regardless of final payment). Displaying words including *sobrevivientes, con ganas* ('with spirit'), and *juntos* (together), Ibarra found a way to support the struggling businesses of the Piñata District while also bringing their material culture to audiences trapped at home. While they hope to return to the grounds of the Piñata District once the pandemic subsides (as pandemics have done before and will do again), for the time being, Ibarra's "9th to Olympic" is accessible through their Instagram account, @9thtoolympic, a staging ground for the hybrid of Ibarra's working collaboration with the piñateros and the piñateros' latest wares.

Ultimately, Ibarra's intervention into normative notions of fine art and social engagement offers optimism for what can pass between people despite distances, physical and cultural. The disruptions of COVID-19 are significant and painful, but they do not have to be obliterating; there are those who know of transformation and the manner in which it necessitates communal support; if we feel isolated in these highly precedented times, it may be because we have spent so much of our lives alone. Ibarra and the people of L.A.'s Piñata District show us that despite the unforeseen difficulties and sorrows that collide with our lives, there is always a way to survive—together, with spirit. ■

Benjamin Nicholson is Ph.D. student in Media Arts + Practice at the University of Southern California. He can be found around Los Angeles giving performative PowerPoint presentations, discussing corpses, and sharing potatoes with friends and strangers alike.

Sobrevivientes, in collaboration with Carrusel Party Supplies, shot in front of Carrusel Party Supplies with Lino the piñatero, May 2020. Credit: Dulce Soledad Ibarra.

"Graft"
Edra Soto at the Museum of Contemporary Photography

by Francine Almeda

As the pandemic grinds into its ninth month, the colder days have ushered in a calloused sense of resignation. Trapped in cycles of lockdowns and re-openings, I have gluttonously consumed news in the morning, day, and night in an effort to quell my ambient anxiety. Unfortunately, to no one's surprise, this does little to foster any sense of calm; in fact, it achieves the opposite. With seemingly consecutive traumatic events occurring, it is not an uncommon practice these days to, metaphorically, sigh in exasperation and say, "Well, what next?" And yet, a sense of urgent action is needed now more than ever. Racism is far from being dismantled and the pandemic is in full force. How can we continue to fight when we are burnt out?

Edra Soto's architectural installation *Graft*, which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP) on July 7th, 2020 as part of the group show "Temporal: Puerto Rican Resistance," elegantly exemplifies how the portrayal of trauma can be healing and empowering rather than triggering, and importantly, how art can create space for rest and, thus, resistance.

Graft is the overarching title of Soto's larger research project which she began in 2013. This project is aptly named after the definition of "graft" in two senses of the word: first, the specific bodily connotations (i.e., a skin graft), and second, the broader usage of the word as a verb connoting transfer. The intersection of these two definitions aids Soto in her exploration of herself and her body, as a migrant from Puerto Rico, being literally transferred and "grafted" into the United States.

Iterations of *Graft* have taken many forms in different locations over the years. At the Chicago Cultural Center, her installation mimicked *quiebrasoles* (the decorative concrete blocks which complement *rejas*) in a delicate pink. In Millennium Park, Soto built a black "screenhouse" pavilion. In this iteration of the project at the MocP, she gives voice to those who have lived through Hurricane Maria, a Category Five storm which ripped through Dom-

Graft, Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP), installation shot. Photo courtesy of Edra Soto.

Graft, MoCP, installation shot close-up. Photo courtesy of Edra Soto.

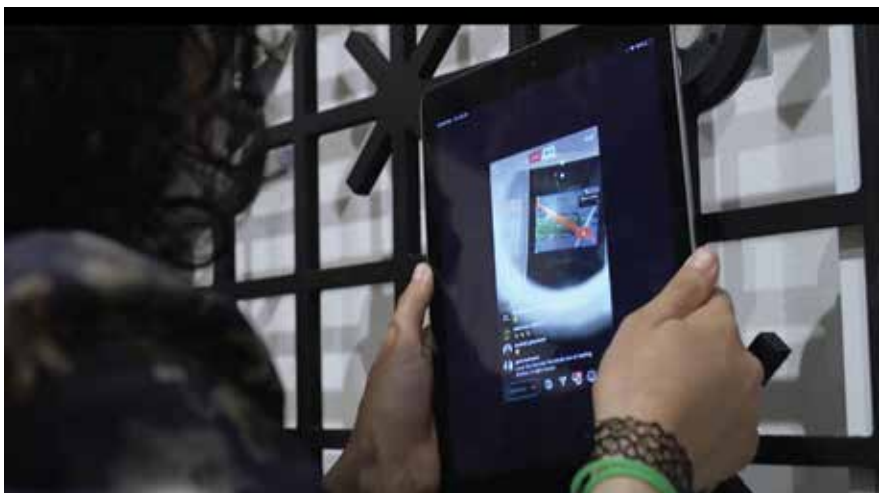
inica, Saint Croix, and Puerto Rico in September 2017. Although the United States has remained structurally intact throughout the 2020, the destruction of "normal" life has felt just as severe throughout the pandemic. Soto's confrontation of trauma in her most recent iteration of *Graft*, therefore, feels all the more timely.

Graft recontextualizes intimate memories and painful emotions with a restrained serenity. The installation commands the entire back wall of the gallery. Here, she has built a massive replication of a Puerto Rican *reja*, a ubiquitous part of the island's vernacular architecture. A *reja* is an iron screen which commonly covers many outdoor patios in Puerto Rico, and in turn is a symbol of home, beauty, and security. Soto has focused on its iconic, repetitive shapes and translated the design into a completely new context, interweaving lines of Xs and Os to create one giant screen. The wall seems to undulate. Yet as one approaches the wall, its solid, weighty presence is revealed. Upon even closer examination, it becomes clear that the Os hold small mirrors with even smaller holes. I peered inside the viewfinder of these mirrors and perceived a tiny image. I found myself moving with the rhythm of the wall, bending, leaning and pacing in an almost meditative process across the room.

The images behind the mirrors are a compilation of found images and photographs Soto herself had taken the day after Hurricane Maria. During a virtual artist talk, Dalina Aimée Perdomo Álvarez (the MoCP's curatorial fellow for diversity in the arts) nodded along in agreement as Soto described the challenges her family faced in the aftermath of the hurricane.

"I feel like every Puerto Rican defines is able to 'bookmark' parts of their lives with different hurricanes," Alvarez says, jokingly, but simultaneously revealing a sobering truth—destruction is a pervasive, if not normal, part of Puerto Rican life.

Moreover, Soto and Alvarez were in agreement about the harmful practice of presenting post-destruction images: "I was tired of seeing people standing in front of their destroyed houses, over and over [...] when this show first opened, I was nervous to even invite my parents. I thought it would be too much for them," Alvarez admitted.



Curatorial Fellow Dalina Aimée Perdomo Álvarez demonstrates the interactive mirrors in *Graft* at MoCP. Photo courtesy of MoCP.

However, Soto does not present images of the destruction in their entirety; but rather in small, tolerable fragments. Hidden behind the viewfinder, these images feel like a memory, just out of reach.

Soto explains that the mirrors were initially a purely practical solution to a problem: to disguise the hole where the image was.[1] However, as more and more visitors experienced the piece, it became clear that people were delighted to be a "part" of the installation—it was becoming a social media phenomenon. People were posting images of the installation that also captured their own reflection. Visitors were invited to do more than just gaze by actively participating with the work. By allowing the viewer to implicate themselves within the piece, Soto invites both parties to exist in the same visual field: for a brief moment, the viewer and the piece intermingle and are viewed as one.

In this way, Soto seems to understand remembrance and resistance as one and the same. Soto describes the experience, saying, "It is a slow arrival [...] you see the pattern. If you are curious enough, you will discover there are photographs embedded in the pattern. And then look through the work and see what is there. The exploration becomes completely voluntary. That's what I like about this work."[2] It is as if the *reja* is not a gate, but rather an open door welcoming all to approach. In a time where the news is forced upon us, the ability to gently and voluntarily explore feels like a distant concept. Through her installation, Soto creates a place to rest, reflect and process. In steady steel lines and through personal photographs, she embodies the intersection of strength and remembrance.

As 2020 comes to a close, I can't help but wonder how we will remember this historic time decades from now. Continuing forward to reach that time feels like an endless task. It would be naive to think that simply slowing down and acting with care will be a magic bullet against the fatigue of constant bad news, and yet Soto's work envisions a hopeful way to continue forward. ■

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Footnotes
1. mocp.org/events/event?id=33989566954676
2. Ibid.

Graft, *Untitled, Miami Beach*. Photo courtesy of Edra Soto. (https://edrasoto.com/home.html)

"What black is this, you say?"
Amanda Williams at Rhona Hoffman Gallery

by Nathan Worcester

"*What black is this, you say?"*, Amanda Williams' solo exhibition at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery, emerged from the crucible of summer 2020, when the death of George Floyd propagated a wave of outrage. On Blackout Tuesday—June 2nd, 2020—more than 28 million Instagram users dutifully changed their profile pictures to black squares. As Williams explains in an artist's statement, she rose to the occasion in her own distinctive way:

> *I'll be honest: I wasn't feeling the black out. I hate stuff like that, but I caved. Wanted to be in solidarity. But Color is everything to me. You can't just say 'black'... which one? So I'm gonna inaugurate a different black each day until I don't feel like it anymore. Why? Cuz I'm black and I can!*

Best known for "Color(ed) Theory," which saw her painting abandoned houses across Chicago's heavily African American South Side in a range of bright hues, Williams' use of color ruptures convention and definition. It's a clever gambit: while laying claim to the promise and peril of racial identity, her appropriation of different shades and a variety of materials highlights the fluidity and instability of racial categories. Existing as it does in a society that still quietly respects the "one drop rule," American blackness partakes heavily of certain kinds of American whiteness—both culturally, through the overlap of folkways, religious beliefs, and cultural features, and genetically, through the tangle of bloodlines. (While different subpopulations have different admixtures, on average, African Americans are about a quarter European American by ancestry). While anyone interested in the American idea would be interested in exploring those themes, Williams senses she is uniquely entitled to do so right now (*"Cuz I'm black and I can!"*)

Williams' works are a study in these alternating similarities and differences. *Feel the Warmth and Luxury*, two squares of black faux fur that gleam under the gallery

Amanda Williams, *Feel the Warmth and Luxury*, 2020. Faux fur, gold leaf on wood panel, 16 x 9 inches. Photo courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Amanda Williams, "*Until the day he died, my father drove out to Pullman Bank on 111th (even after it was bought by US Bank) to do his banking because it was the only bank that would give him a small business loan to start his accounting firm in 1977; loyalty"—black (06.05.20)*, 2020. Oil on linen stretched over panel. Photo courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Amanda Williams, "*You're not African-American, you're black"—black (08.23.20),* 2020. Oil on linen stretched over panel 60 x 60 inches. Photo courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

lighting, references norms of style that would not seem out of place in broad swaths of white, Hispanic, or Asian America (though they might be alien to the *bien pensants*). Yet nearby: *"Your love of bird watching could have caused your death that day. Your Harvard degree does not insure your safety."* Williams' lived experience departs greatly from that of white America, at least as it is officially registered in our media and academia (and, it bears emphasizing, as it is genuinely experienced by most of the middle and upper classes).

Williams develops and commits to her ideas over time, a journey memorialized in Hoffman's chronological arrangement of images. One small, early watercolor—*"You're not African-American, you're black"—black (08.23.20)*, a quartet of bright red streaks slicing through a stormy, almost maroon background—is recapitulated as a large oil painting with the same title.

The show also exposes the range of rhetorical strategies that Williams uses to drive her message home. While unafraid of humor (*"I thought red kool-aid was juice til I was 10 years old"*), Williams generally strikes a serious tone (*"Until the day he died, my father drove out to Pullman Bank on 111th [even after it was bought by US Bank] to do his banking because it was the only bank that would give him a small business loan to start his accounting firm in 1977; loyalty"*). Alongside her memorable captions, Williams' abstractions read as another species of rhetoric—open-ended enough to invite different interpretations yet oriented toward the central conceptual pole of blackness.

While it will take us many years to make sense of 2020, Williams' series is a good place to start. Her deft use of social media, which enables real-time feedback in a way that was once impossible, epitomizes the mood of this Year of Elevated Cortisol Production. Imagined, instantiated, and collectively experienced over a brief yet intense span of weeks, Williams' creations will be better understood in the fullness of time. ■

"What black is this, you say?" ran at Rhona Hoffman Gallery from November 6th through December 19th of 2020.

Nathan Worcester is the managing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He lives in Chicago.

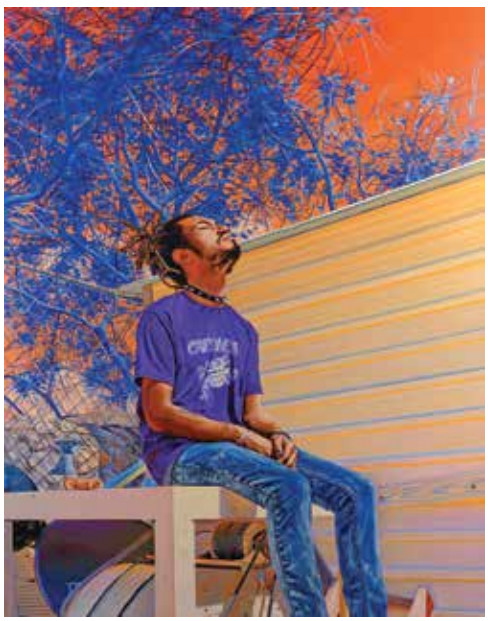
"Gatekeepers" and "Corazon Y Dignidad"

by K.A. Letts

If the 2020 presidential election showed us one thing, it's that people of Hispanic heritage are as varied in their views as the many Spanish speaking countries from which they hail. That thought was driven home for me even more when looking at the work of three Latina artists who were showing their work in Detroit last week.

"Gatekeepers": Paintings by Marianna Olague at David Klein Gallery

First and most spectacularly, El Paso native Marianna Olague is having her first solo show at David Klein through mid-December. Olague is a recent graduate of Cranbrook Academy of Art, and her exhibit "Gatekeepers" serves thrilling notice of her arrival on the scene in Detroit. The show consists mostly of large, technically accomplished oil paintings, and the artist has chosen friends and family as subjects. They inhabit and animate the gritty urban landscape of her native town, El Paso, Texas. The figures, life-size or larger, are often portrayed as they look down and away from the viewer. Along with the cityscape and the figures, Olague gives equal visual weight to the harsh, brilliant play of Southwestern sun and shadow, almost a presence in its own right. The paintings are uniformly excellent in quality, but I found a couple particularly engaging. T*odo Se Vuelve Alma* captures a young man, the artist's cousin, absorbing the late afternoon glow in a nondescript industrial lot. The tattoo on his arm reads Todo Se Vuelve Alma, a line from a favorite poem of the artist. In spite of the unlovely setting, the painting's brilliant blues and oranges render the image transcendent. Olague's painting of her mother, *Mom Delivers Grubhub*, is a psychologically resonant image that captures both the dignity of the woman and her somber quotidian reality. Walls and barriers occur throughout the paintings, subtle references to the border wall that lurks just outside the city of El Paso.



LEFT: Marianna Olague, *Todo Se Vuelve Alma*, 2019, oil on canvas, 66" x 52".

RIGHT: Marianna Olague, *Mom Delivers Grubhub*, 2020, oil on canvas, 66" x 50".

Photos courtesy of David Klein Gallery.

Rosa María Zamarrón, *Señora Felisa*, 2017, inkjet print, 36" x 53". Photo courtesy of Galerie Camille.

"Corazon Y Dignidad": Rosa María Zamarrón + Amelia E. Duran at Galerie Camille

Across town at Galerie Camille, and in a decidedly lower key, we find "Corazon y Dignidad." Two Latina artists, one a Chilean and the other an American of Mexican heritage, describe the Hispanic experience and its aspirations through photography and installation. Rosa María Zamarrón's photographs document the town in Central Mexico from which her family comes and the people who live there. She turns her unsentimental but empathetic gaze on workers at their jobs, emphasizing both the essential value and the inescapable drudgery of labor. A particularly poignant image is her inkjet print *Señora Felisa*, which captures an elderly woman in her storefront shop, still hard at work in old age. Like the other subjects in this series, she is stately, self-possessed, and gazing directly at the camera.

Amelia E. Duran, who shares both the gallery space and Zamarrón's social awareness, presents herself as an activist/artist. She uses humble materials and the visual vocabulary of her Chilean background to advocate for change against what she describes as "hierarchies and oppressive social structures that keep communities disenfranchised." The forms she employs, such as the ofrenda she has installed in the gallery during "Corazon y Dignidad," have their roots in traditional Hispanic folk arts. Her three-dimensional piece *Death to Class Struggle* is made of plastic, tinfoil, and papier-mâché, referencing the political puppets that populated the streets of Chile during recent civil unrest.

These three artists could hardly be more different in their art practice, from the painted poetry of Marianna Olague, to the cool documentary eye of Rosa María Zamarrón, to Amelia E. Duran's agitprop. Yet it turns out they do have a common awareness: of family's importance, of the intrinsic value of labor, and of the perils and politics of immigration, recurring threads and themes that run through the diverse tapestry of the Hispanic experience in America. ■

K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the *New Art Examiner*, a working artist (kalettsart.com) and art blogger (rustbeltarts.com). She has shown her paintings and drawing in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.

Amelia E. Duran, *Corazon Y Dignidad* installation, 2020, mixed media. Photo courtesy of Galerie Camille.