

# VULTURE

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## The Art World Goes Dark

By Jerry Saltz



Photo: Rogers Fund, 1956/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

It felt like the end of something last Friday, as my wife and I made our way through the last few deserted galleries still open in Chelsea. Each was staffed by one or two people preparing to suspend gallery hours for a non-determined time into the foreseeable future. It was so sad and very scary. In these last few hours before total shutdown, I saw three of what otherwise would have been in contention for Best Shows of 2020 — if such lists will be compiled nine months from now. But it's hard to even imagine that far into the future; "now" seems so brutal and constantly present.

The first of the three shows was Donald Judd's gigantic plywood 1980 wall sculpture, unseen in New York since it was exhibited in 1981. This masterpiece extends the entire length of one of Gagosian's grand palaces. Next came Sikkema Jenkins & Co. and Kara Walker's large impassioned portraits of Obama, including one of him as Shakespeare's Othello, holding the severed head of Trump, which struck such bareness within me that I shuddered. Another depicts the former president as a black savage in a loincloth, carrying a spear, sitting on a hog. Walker gives us Obama as mythic figure, not a man. Finally, an exhibition at DC Moore Gallery of Romare Bearden's 1960s abstract paintings — a shock because I had never known he made paintings like this! All of these shows now sit empty — as do hundreds of others in galleries and museums. I haven't even

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mentioned the jewel of a show at Andrew Edlin of little-seen American visionary Karla Knight. Or the beautiful 1930s and 1940s visions of Agnes Pelton at the Whitney. Galleries and museums have gone dark all over the world. And will stay like that, probably, for some time.

No one knows what the economic damages will be, or how totally the art world will be remade. This is a complex infrastructure made up of people at every economic level, all but a cadre of them living precarious lives in the best of times — dependent on the patronage of the very wealthy, but not themselves secure at all. Things could return to quasi normal when galleries open again — indeed, the art world soared after the market collapse of 2008 and 2009, as inequality accelerated and money sought refuge in the so-called safer vessels of art (art, safe?!?). Prices skyrocketed at the top, megagalleries mushroomed, and all the rest. But it's also possible that, this time, numerous non-megagalleries won't make it through to whatever the other side of this storm will look like.

Perhaps, whole small art scenes will be economically wiped out. Either way, many who work in and around art will lose jobs and health insurance. If buyers aren't buying and people aren't seeing art, teaching jobs are suspended and employment curtailed, what happens to the already fragile financial support systems artists depend on? Art will go on. It always has. All we know is that everything is different; we don't know how, only that it is. The unimaginable is now reality.

That's the rub. Art's primary metaphysical building block is that which has never been imagined. This is why I can say — and know — that art will go on. The reason is that art is an advanced abstract operating system devised for imagining the unseen, gleaning the group mind, a tool to invent new protocols, experience rapture from form, explore consciousness, map reality, create constellations of unspoken communication that echo across millennia — things that never change but that are different for every person who sees it, and is even different every time we look at the same work. This is because art is the ability to embed the unimaginable in material. Creativity is a survival strategy; it's in every bone in our bodies, and always has been.

Darwin knew this. He was emphatic that survival isn't of "the strongest or the most intelligent." So tragic he was misread this way. Darwin said that survival depended on those "most adaptive to change." Boom! That's what art does, maybe better than anything! It is flexible, adaptive, pervasive, hungry for change — else all art would still look like Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mesopotamian carving, or a Raphael Madonna. This is the built-in reason that art is

constantly changing itself. I actually think art might be using us to reproduce and evolve itself. But I *would* think that.

Yet even with all this ingenuity, however, the last few decades have seen many demonizing art as frivolous, formal, gratuitous, useless, decadent. Art is all of these things. And it always has been, because those things are part of each of us. Pleasure is a form of knowledge. The decorative is a force, a creative force. So are all the rest of those supposedly shallow values. From the first bead bracelets made in the caves and painted Paleolithic stone axes to Hokusai's ornamental "Great Wave" and Matisse's art as a "good armchair." Even Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son" was painted to decorate a dining room. All these objects are complex forms of beauty. In *Vermeer in Bosnia*, Lawrence Weschler wrote that the jurist for the Yugoslav war-crimes tribunal in the Hague took breaks to look at two of the most beautiful things ever made, Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* and his *View of Delft*. He did this not because the works were "merely beautiful," he said, but because these objects were "invented to heal pain ... radiate a centeredness, a peacefulness, a serenity, and are a psychic balm."

We may now ask: Can art change the world? In respect to those suffering and about to suffer, we must say no. However, art *does* change lives, and lives can change the world.

I'm not saying art is special — of special use or special importance, especially in the gruesome future we are all about to enter. It's just part of the whole ball of wax. But it can help, too. Yesterday, I happened by a short video on Instagram posted by the Prado of its magnificent El Greco gallery. My whole day changed. I feel it still. Many galleries and museums are trying to make art available online. I can imagine a 24/7 MoMA live feed of *The Starry Night*; the Met could do roving scans of its Egyptian collection. Let the New Museum post videos of its wild Peter Saul show. Critics could write about art that exists, anywhere rather than art that is on public view, or new. Maybe I will.

Maybe things will be different in two years when we reemerge battered and bruised. If I live, I may have written more obituaries than I will want to remember. We did this during AIDS, and it was shattering. Maybe we will travel less, not run around from biennial to art fair to museum show to biennial to more endless art fairs. Forced isolation might favor more intimate artistic practices, things done in small spaces, at kitchen tables with the kids reading, drawing or wreaking chaos nearby. Maybe all those gigantic artist studios with scores of assistants won't be as much of a thing; maybe we won't

have to go see event installations in grand exhibition halls and massive atriums. Or maybe in two years, even after possibly witnessing more social and economic suffering and disruption than has been witnessed in generations — the Coronavirus Generation; Generation C — not much will be learned. (Look at the current U.S. political administration.) This is what happened after September 11. Many of us initially thought that everything was different, even if we didn't know how. It turned out that the same forces leading up to 9/11 began driving culture more. We saw the Bush-Cheney War Machine and Flint, Michigan. Rather than changing, it is possible that coronavirus will make things more of what they already were before this was visited on the world. Coronavirus feels very different than 9/11 — much bigger, more mysterious, terrifying, and far-reaching. Whether we change or not, things are being changed by forces beyond our control. All we know is that viruses come — but viruses also go. *Ars longa.*