

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

The Art World Is Easy to Dislike. Here Are Some Reasons Not to.

For T's inaugural online art issue, we'll be highlighting some of the things that give us hope in an often-derided industry.

By M.H. Miller June 11, 2018



Clockwise from top left: pill bottles tossed into a fountain during a protest led by Nan Goldin; a re-imagined book cover by Katherine Bernhardt; Glenn Ligon introduces his favorite artwork by another artist; Agnes Denes in her public art project "Wheatfield-A Confrontation"; the fabricator Matt Dilling in his Brooklyn studio; Reza Abdoh's 1992 play "Law of Remains."

Clockwise from top left: TW Collins; Katherine Bernhardt; Scott Ross; John McGrail, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects; Sean Donnola; Gregory Halpern; Paula Court

There is a cliché about New York that each generation who lives here seems to believe that every previous generation that occupied the city was better off — cooler clubs, cheaper rent, more talented artists and thinkers. But the contemporary art world, which is centered in New York but has spread to nearly every country in the world, is unique in its cyclical belief that the present is as bad as it gets.

Ever since Arthur Danto coined the term “artworld” in a 1964 essay, observers of this community have been pointing out possible harbingers of its demise in real time through a variety of recycled complaints: Museums are no longer repositories for our shared cultural history, but rather opulent arenas for perfunctory entertainment; galleries have become, at best, trade dealerships for robber barons and, at worst, actual Ponzi schemes; the rising power of auction houses and art fairs has transformed artists and their trade into so much commodity. In 1967, writing in *The New York Times*, the critic John Canaday described the growing crowds at the Museum of Modern Art, “where people pass blind before a kind of art that they were never meant to understand and would offer them very little reward if they did,” and worried that MoMA would become “a hothouse for preciousities.” In 1980, the *Times* reporter Rita Reif decried an auction season in New York in which \$147.9 million worth of painting and sculpture had been sold by the city’s two leading auction houses. “The ‘show business’ atmosphere of the most glamorous art auctions has made them media events, gaveling extravaganzas at which television cameras record every fall of the hammer,” Reif wrote. “Gone is the silent solemnity of the art dealer’s gallery, and with it to some degree the notion that art must be communed with, studied and absorbed in quiet.”

How quaint! I wonder what she’d think of last month’s [charity auction](#) of the collection of David and Peggy Rockefeller at Christie’s, which totaled nearly \$833 million. There was actual disappointment within the industry that the sale didn’t make \$1 billion, as many had anticipated. Tastes and aesthetics transform over the years, but the only consistency in the art world is that it grows larger and richer as time passes. Yes, the arguments against it — namely, that it is a largely unregulated and unethical dumping ground through

which the most corrupt among the very wealthy can launder their money and reputations — are perhaps valid. But there are only so many times a person can make this argument before he starts to feel like he's sitting in a burning house, throwing fuel on the flames, complaining about how hot it is. Why not get up to fetch a bucket of water?

I've followed the art world for the better part of a decade and I've noticed only lately a sense that change is in the air. And so, for T's inaugural online art issue, which we will be rolling out over the next two weeks (roughly coinciding with the Art Basel fair in Switzerland, this community's annual commercial leviathan, because some things never change), we are highlighting a few reasons to have hope: A growing number of integral art dealers are finally talking openly about the problems they face in this industry, and how to fix them; a group of black gallerists, still an anomaly in an art world that has increasingly recognized black artists in recent years, is gaining influence and changing art history; an 87-year-old land art pioneer who created one of the most impressive public installations in New York's history is finally getting her due in the city; the former owner of a midsize gallery in Manhattan has figured out how to make the art world work for him, by moving his business to Long Island and embarking on a career as a successful painter; one of our greatest living photographers is taking on the opioid crisis, and in the process calling out the family of major arts patrons who brought a powerful prescription opioid to the market. Meanwhile, for the next two weeks, the site will focus on contemporary art and artists, who will share original works, discuss their creative process and reveal what inspires them.

A few well-meaning people does not mean that the art world is going to suddenly stop exploiting artists for money or become any less corporate, but the mere presence of someone trying to alter the system from within is reason enough to feel optimistic about the future of art in New York and beyond.

M.H. Miller is the arts editor of T Magazine.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/11/t-magazine/the-art-world-is-easy-to-dislike-here-are-some-reasons-not-to.html>