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Art Markets without Art, Art without Objects

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The art world was already experiencing a profound crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the discourse until that point had largely focused more on the hopelessness of the situation, rather than the possibility for meaningful change. The massive market disruption caused by the virus outbreak created an immediate shift away from consumption of physical objects both into the digital realm of social media and virtual, participatory art experiences and beyond traditional gallery walls into outdoor art venues. A liquid consumption model has emerged in new models such as NFTs that function like unique objects for digital

artworks. Successful strategies have become part of a paradigm shift in art consumption by prioritizing the non-ownership of non-canonical non-objects. Certain organizations' methodologies, such as sculpture parks and public art, have been in practice for decades, but have come into focus during this time of change. This study seeks to reveal the surging growth of this new model through an analysis of the new valuation of non-objects over the last year especially, from liquid consumption and the surge of NFTs to experiential consumption and the value of space.

Keywords: art market, sculpture parks, contemporary art, COVID-19, experiential consumption, NFTs, ownership consumption

Until very recently, the driving force in the consumption of art was objects. These objects were prioritized based on their closely correlated valuation in both cultural and financial capital. If there is one thing COVID-19 has done to the art world, it has broken the connection between objects and their financial capital. The art world was already experiencing a profound crisis before COVID-19 hit it in late February 2020, but the discourse, up until that point, had largely focused more on the hopelessness of the situation than the possibility for meaningful change. That art fairs were destroying the struggling contemporary gallery was well-known, and auctions were cannibalizing the secondary gallery sector, so much so that it disappeared before our eyes. These changes, however, did nothing to challenge the basic commodification of art objects.

Even museums maintain a privileged ownership of highly monetized artworks fetishized as holy relic—like attractions. Only COVID-19 created enough disruption to the entrenched powers' business models to make alternative visions conceivable in this brief moment. The neoliberal structure of the distribution, exhibition, and canonization of artworks is now being challenged from all sides. In response to an abrupt cessation in dominant forms of aesthetic commodification, audiences instead began to confound these pre-existing structures and establish new paradigms in art consumption. These new models in one way or another undo the formulas of exchange, whether by taking the form of an art market without art or of the non-ownership of non-canonical non-objects.

The very concept of art collecting began with a new type of fetishization of objects based on authorship, which represents a pronounced change from earlier times, when objects might have been prized as treasure for their input materials. In the Hellenistic period in the West and the Later Eastern Han Dynasty in China, objects began to be valued based on a knowledge of who made them—in other words, as artworks made by artists (Alsop 1982: 1–49; Pliny the Elder 1991: 1–21). Very often, these objects acquire symbolic meaning different from other, more mundane objects (Schultheis 2020). This valorization of the objects that collectors prized evolved into a sophisticated system of symbolic goods that acquire cultural capital and can be converted into numeric denominations of financial capital (Bourdieu 1979). Class distinctions brought on by industrialization further emphasized the need for prestige goods and their conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899). Despite advancing innovations in printing and photography allowing for a wider, more egalitarian dissemination of artistic images, the art world continued to fetishize the one-of-a-kind object as holding some very specific 'aura' (Benjamin 1969). Furthermore, the prices achieved by these unique objects reflect not just their holder's position within social networks, such as rank and status, but also 'webs of meaning' (Velthuis 2005: 11). By the late twentieth century, a highly professionalized art business had taken on the characteristics of the wider neoliberal order, particularly its ethos of competitiveness (Davies 2014).

Art has been, until recently, consumed in two dichotomous formats, experiential consumption and ownership consumption. Let us consider the art world to be a series of concentric circles, with the largest being the 'art world' as such, which contains everything that has to do with art: art production, commerce, exhibitions, and conversations (written and spoken). Inside of that circle would be the 'art business.' That term would encompass all of the professional activities and institutions involved with art, including the experiential economy, that is, entities offering an art experience (first and foremost, the museum and public collections sectors). The innermost circle of the art business would be those people and entities involved in the commercial exchange in art products: in other words, the 'art market' (Taylor 2019: 1–2).

Within the art market, though, exist many further subdivisions between primary and secondary markets. The primary market of new, never-sold pieces can also be termed the contemporary art market, while the secondary market (commerce in older, pre-owned goods) can be further

subdivided into fine art and the resale trade in applied arts (the antiques market). An ever-expanding auction sector competes with both these retail sectors and has increasingly succeeded in cannibalizing that commerce. This is only one of many examples of an area of the art business that was already in crisis well before COVID-19. The structural weaknesses of an art economy based around a market in the ownership of objects and a parallel commerce in experiences purchased with objects that are owned by someone else had become glaringly clear by March 2020. In response to the lockdown and the absence of offline in-person consumption of art in the form of ownership or experiences, a different mode of consuming art has become ascendant: that of liquid consumption, which supersedes the solid consumption of material objects (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). The concept of liquid consumption emphasizes the dematerialization of goods and experiences. Ownership may still be possible, but tends to be replaced with purchased access. Liquid consumption emphasizes solutions that allow for a commerce in cultural goods that trade like objects, but are not objects. Even though it prioritizes ephemerality and access over outright ownership, those distinctions continue to blur and are even beginning to reach a point of convergence.

The stress on the market in ownership of objects had already been apparent for over a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic. Back in 2006, the market in antique furniture went into severe decline in something we call the Brown Furniture Market Collapse (McKeough 2018). The loss of interest in 18th- and 19th-century European furniture was caused partially by a reaction to an Antiques Roadshow—driven boom that had preceded it, as well as New York interior designers shifting their interest to the mid-century modern style ('Out with the old...' 2015). Similarly, the galleries that work in secondary market sales have also begun to disappear. Their disappearance, however, has everything to do with the ever-greater transparency brought on by an internet-charged auction sector (Moore 2018). The resulting shortage of discreetly-sourced good secondary market material provides the best explanation for what drove the Knoedler gallery to begin buying poorly-provenanced Abstract Expressionist works from a little-known Long Island dealer in the 1990s, causing New York's most shocking forgery scandal in a generation (Miller 2016).

The graduate program at Western Colorado University recently completed a National Endowment for the Arts—funded study of the U.S. art and design market and COVID-19's impact on it (Cardenas et al. 2021). After surveying art galleries across the country, one observation became clear: there were two types of contemporary commercial galleries. One we find in Chelsea and a few other elite art centers like Los Angeles; then there are the galleries found everywhere else. The authors of the study termed these Chelsea-type galleries and regional-type galleries. The small and mid-size New York galleries of Chelsea have been in crisis for some time already (Douglas 2018). The Chelsea-type model, first of all, can be distinguished from the Alpha galleries located on the ground floor of prime retail buildings in the area between 10th and 11th Avenues. The juggernaut success of Alphas like David Zwirner and Larry Gagosian is one of the core causes of the crisis among the small and

medium Chelsea galleries, which occupy above-street spaces in what formerly were warehouses and office buildings. They frequently pay \$10,000–20,000 a month in rent for what might seem like an office converted to a gallery ('What it costs...' 2017). The most defining feature of their business model is its emphasis on a white cube interior gallery space that is primarily employed for month-long solo shows. Paintings are hung on the line, with significant amounts of white wall space to separate them.

Outside of New York, the regional gallery model establishes itself in towns with a profile in tourism and outdoor recreation. These galleries are often founded by an artist who needs a place to show, and they invite other artists to also show at the gallery. Each artist receives ten to 20 square feet of wall space, and they hang their artworks salon-style. Interior spaces will hold 3D pieces, and handmade jewelry will be on display in vitrines. The difference in business models has much to do with the difference in collector bases. The Chelsea-type gallery has a local collector base for which they must put on new exhibitions each month to get them to come back. The regional gallery relies on a transient collector base (tourists) and so must put its whole stable of artists out at the same time.

The Chelsea-type model is obviously vastly more expensive to operate. Even if they do not offer their artists a stipend as the Alpha galleries do, Chelsea-type galleries do usually expect exclusivity, but such an arrangement also predicates that the gallery plans to produce sales adequate to sustain their artists. Regional galleries do not offer any such arrangements, and artists in the U.S. West generally expect much less from their gallery in terms of career promotion. In fact, the (understandable) cause of the crisis in the small and mid-size New York galleries is their inability to sustain their business model, in particular, their inability to afford the rent. There is nothing surprising in this statement. The constant quest for cheaper rents is a relentless force in the evolution of the physical landscape of an art market. This is what drove the migration of galleries from 57th Street to SoHo and eventually to Chelsea. The problem lies in the recurring question in New York: what is the next Chelsea? The problem here is that the recipe for art market-driven gentrification is too well-known by everyone, especially developers. Every emerging art center, whether Williamsburg, Bushwick, Long Island City, or even Jersey City, has been so quickly gentrified that any corresponding cost-benefit analysis of rent savings quickly evaporated (Lakin 2018). For better or worse, Chelsea remains, even in the time of COVID-19, the center of the global contemporary art market. In some ways, we must understand that the Chelsea-type model is built to fail. With rents in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 a month range, galleries can only survive if they sell at least \$40,000 worth of artwork each month, given a 40–60 percent cut going to the artist. COVID-19 has ensured, if anything, that this model will definitely fail.

The most notable symptom of the art market's ability to push this fetishization of conspicuous consumption to its ultimate crisis is art fairs. They also explain the other reason why the Chelsea-type model is unsustainable: the cost of their other rent, paid to attend art fairs, which have again proven to ben-

efit elite galleries and not the masses of galleries who make up most stands (Single 2020). Jerry Salz (2018) wrote on this three years ago, indicating that galleries routinely spend \$150,000 to attend a major fair like Art Basel Miami Beach. These costs necessitate sales of at least \$400,000 in order to make the fair profitable. Such staggering costs mandate that artworks be in the \$20,000 to \$100,000 price range in order to provide adequate revenues. The problem with such a price point is that, for that much money, collectors are expecting to be purchasing art that is on its way to canonical status. Of course, not all these artworks or their artists can be on a trajectory to the MoMA.

Such aspirations, however, lead to the production and promotion of art that is intended to be museum-worthy, but may not be living room-worthy. This is a peace that regional gallery artists have made with their career: their works are meant to be more beautiful and less provocative, because they are designed for domestic interiors. New York galleries are frequently creating a second exhibition space to show their full stable, whereas regional galleries are creating rotating exhibition areas to provide something like a solo show (Corbett 2018). Both models, however, have been equally crushed by the COVID-19 shutdown of public events such as art walks and tourism, and have had to resort instead to further virtualizing the gallery visiting experience (Jebb 2020).

The art market, structured around a visibly conspicuous ownership consumption model, therefore, has been in crisis for some time already. The museum sector, like the art fairs, has seen spectacular but ultimately unsustainable growth in recent decades. The Art Basel art fair model relied on a hybrid income from stand rentals and ticket-buying commoners. In a similar way, the museum model relies on a hybrid revenue stream of monetized experiential consumption (ticket sales), together with social and cultural capital prestige exchanged with high-net-worth individuals for their financial capital (donations). In recent years, that model had reached its maximum expansion (Pogrebin 2016), and further growth has become impossible.

Whatever the art business's prior structural weaknesses before COVID-19, the lockdowns crushed its models. Museums shut. Art fairs were cancelled. Galleries closed. The responses of each of these sectors have been telling as regards their ability to survive the crisis. The internet had played an important role in the functioning of the art world since its inception, but this role had been still peripheral to the core role played by objects. The rising significance of Instagram, however, already meant the creeping displacement of objects, though generally still in the service of their ultimate commercial transaction (Siegel 2015).

While some museums have managed to partially reopen and have been able to return to reduced visitor numbers, art fairs continue to be able to offer little more than online viewing rooms. One dealer put it as follows: 'Eventually, it's all the same: just a list of works for sale, with images, info, and increasingly now, pricing. It's not as if the online viewing room is some other kind of experience' (Schneider 2020). The collapse of an art business predicated on monetized consumption, either of experiences with artworks or exclusive

ownership of them, gave the art consumer pause. It also moved consumers to consider new possibilities, because demand for art did not disappear with the virus. Paul Valéry predicted in 1928 that:

'Works of art will acquire a kind of ubiquity. We shall only have to summon them and there they will be, either in their living actuality or restored from the past. They will not merely exist in themselves but will exist wherever someone with a certain apparatus happens to be. A work of art will cease to be anything more than a kind of source or point of origin whose benefit will be available, and quite fully so, wherever we wish. Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual- or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign' (Valéry 1964: 225).

The crisis ensuing from the elimination of opportunities for conspicuous consumption like art fairs was finally making Valéry's prediction a reality, one where works of art increasingly resided on the Internet. The role of the digitized artwork was transforming. The signifier was becoming the signified.

The Brooklyn Rail, a long-time staple of the New York art scene that provides an independent and free forum for the arts, took advantage of the lockdown to highlight their New Social Environment lunchtime artist conversations. The essential intellectual stimulation that may have come from a major retrospective at a MoMA-type museum was now replaced by access to the artist speaking directly into their audiences' minds. All art was becoming just concepts. Conceptual art was, in some ways, too successful, in that it was becoming all art, as the process of consuming art was quickly being replaced by the consumption of its concepts. The very problematic inherent in fitting conceptual art into market functions based around objects was now rendered irrelevant by concepts without any objects. Most importantly, participation in these conversations is entirely un-commodified and completely free. Here at these New Social Environment conversations, art was being disengaged from objects.

Arts organizations and museums took to creating similar programming: conversational video conferences that discuss their collections or highlight exhibitions impacted by the lockdowns. The Katonah Museum of Art, whose vivid solo exhibition *Bisa Butler: Portraits* had been closed to physical visitation, began a series of Docent Dialogues, weekly virtual conversations that would highlight different aspects of the show (KMA 2020). A skilled docent would discuss the background of the artist and her work, provide greater context, and utilize high-quality images captured from the exhibition, magnified for the audience. These conversations were truly participatory and interactive, and free with registration.

Art Omi, a contemporary arts center and sculpture park in Ghent, New York, normally hosts dozens of programs that center art as a common good. Similar to the programming of *The Brooklyn Rail*, Art Omi created new virtual programming such as Curatorial Conversations, which featured curated groupings of work on their grounds. These recurring, free online lectures focus on three works on view and their artists or architects, providing rich curatorial

and art historical context for each piece and its significance within the greater landscape. Conversation topics have included discussions on renowned sculptors and architects, who sometimes would be in attendance themselves, providing their own insight at the end of the session. These examples of lectures reached hundreds of viewers across the world and provided them with a greater, more personal understanding of the work on view by coming to them where they were, in their own homes.

Arts education clearly had to shift as well, with on-site instruction and classes being cancelled across the country. During the spring of 2020, Art Omi would normally be preparing weekly children's programming and a robust seasonal camp. The organization created another virtual program, *Creative Momentum*, a weekly series of art projects for children focused on contemporary artists who were either alumni or exhibitors at Art Omi, or had exhibitions directly impacted by COVID-19. This program aimed to connect their young participants, disconnected from in-person art experiences, to contemporary art, and promote critical thinking and social awareness. Sasha Sicurella, director of Art Omi: Education, expressed that the program was a successful foray into this new realm, saying, 'The projects became shared amongst teachers so we really did create some kind of momentum, maybe more than we anticipated doing' (Leigh 2020).

The creation of virtual programming and digital conversations took off immediately, and they have continued to be provided by many organizations, even with art spaces reopening at various capacities. The prevalence of user-made, individual content has expanded greatly, too, from standard social media platforms to newcomers, such as Clubhouse. The audio-only platform became the new social media star of the COVID-19 world, with its invite-only membership and the extreme simplicity of its architecture. Its usefulness lies in replicating human interactions that had made the market's venues platforms for intellectual stimulation, especially exchanges that took place at art fairs (Brown 2021). The fact that Clubhouse rooms cannot be recorded or transcribed becomes its strength, as that should encourage a higher level of forthright discourse (Finkel 2021). One topic in particular—Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs)—has proven to be the platform's most recurring focus, so much so that there is nearly always a room devoted to conversing about their function, usefulness, and how they may transform not just art, but nearly all fields of cultural production (Maneker 2021). The confluence of Clubhouse and NFTs, more than anything else, represents the single most significant challenge to previous paradigms of the art market as it adjusts to a post-COVID-19 reality.

This axial pivot from physical to virtual had, of course, been occurring already for some time. What had quite suddenly changed only in the early months of 2021 was the sudden popularization of the disruptive technology of NFTs, which are 'crypto collectibles,' existing exclusively in code, not connected to a tangible object, that have taken the market by storm (Brown 2021). Digital art itself had already existed for decades, but the consumption of such media and non-objects has been inconspicuous, performed simply by scrolling, and 'the ease of duplication traditionally made it near-impossible

to assign provenance and value to the medium,' (Christie's 2021). It is blockchain technology and ever advancing algorithms that now enable artists and their collectors to verify the rightful owner and authenticity of digital artworks. While NFTs had been traded recently in various virtual marketplaces, such as Nifty Marketplace, where Grimes sold over \$6 million in digital art, they have now entered the mainstream art market (Fu 2021). Auction giant Christie's has taken a firm step into the NFT frontier through the first ever 'purely digital NFT-based work of art offered by a major auction house,' Beeple's *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, sold at auction for \$69 million (Kastrenakes 2021; Stanley 2021). The monetary value assigned to NFTs reflects this shift the market has taken, away from the physical, towards the commodification of the exclusively virtual and experiential. An optimistic interpretation of their rise could be that they mark a transformation from ownership consumption of objects to liquid consumption of the non-material.

Almost immediately following the Christie's Beeple auction, however, closer scrutiny began to reveal the many inherent flaws with NFTs. While their ability to verify a piece's rarity and title and provide for artist resale royalties had been trumpeted, a great part of the medium's popularity lies in its perceived speculative investment value. Trading sites provide immediate, real-time market data on artists and the valuations of their NFTs, much like the information that art finance firms would generate for the latest Chelsea stars. The buyer of *Everydays: The First 5000 Days* was revealed to be Metakovan, a Singapore-based crypto trader (who battled another crypto trader to the \$69 million price) who was himself launching a new cryptoart fund, Metapurse.eth (Gottsegen 2021). In other words, this record price for an NFT of a digital artwork was achieved through speculative bidding by parties who each have every interest in splashy effervescent valuations. In fact, wash trading, a fraudulent technique wherein linked parties systematically bid up assets, is a practice banned in most mature securities markets. A recent article in Bloomberg shows some of the auction platforms selling NFTs to be rife with the practice (Kochkodin 2021). These sorts of abuses have frequently plagued emerging brick-and-mortar, object-based art auction markets, where similar forms of manipulation would have been known as 'chandelier bidding,' 'hidden reserve' (Li & Tan, 2000), or otherwise giving the false appearance of completed sales transactions (Barboza, Bowley, Cox 2013). The NFT market appears to be awash with data on valuations that lack any meaningful relationship to money redeemable in legal, clean denominations of convertible state-backed currencies.

Furthermore, it must be most clearly emphasized that the NFT is unique, not the artwork, unless the artist has agreed to limiting their edition. In other words, the Token is Non-Fungible. The artwork remains very much Fungible. Even if the NFT acts as guarantor of an 'aura' of uniqueness, the work of art will still be digitally and mechanically reproducible. More troubling and perplexing would be concepts of copyright and title. For example, digital artwork created years ago under work-for-hire contracts might be sold by the artist or the copyright holder with no clear concept of how such disputes over title should be resolved, let alone what court on the planet would entertain

NFT-related legal actions. Even if the NFT guarantees good title once it has been minted, there is no guarantee that the minter had good title to the artwork in the first place. In recent days, numerous cases have already emerged of artists believing their artwork to have been inappropriately lifted and sold as an NFT by another party (Dodds 2021). In some instances, the appropriation may be quite difficult to prove, such as with the controversy whether Twisted Vacancy was stealing or simply referencing the works of Ardnaks (NFT Once 2021). NFTs have been appended not just to artworks, but also to things more reminiscent of memorabilia, such as Jack Dorsey's first Tweet (Peters 2021) or NBA highlights (Hayward 2021). They are often referred to as collectables since, like coins, stamps, and baseball cards, they have little display value as compared to, for example, oil on canvas paintings. These collectible NFTs, however, still trade on the principles of the art market, prioritizing rarity and especially primacy. One of the first groups of NFTs was created in 2015, for real estate in a virtual reality land with Minecraft-quality graphics called Etheria. Most of the tiles went unpurchased until March of 2021: when collectors identified these as some of the earliest NFTs minted on the ERC-721 blockchain standard, their valuations rose into the tens of thousands of dollars (in theory) in Ether, a currency used for most NFT purchases (Hakki 2021). Without a means to enjoy the artwork that might be attached to an NFT, it becomes a secondary consideration relative to the NFT's exchange potential. In this way, cryptoart represents something that resembles an art market without much consideration for the art itself, or, quite simply, an art market without art.

Continuing this trend away from the object towards emphasizing the value of the non-object, many organizations in the physical realm are favoring spatial experiences. A successful approach during COVID-19 is for objects to be blended into their surroundings and landscape, so much so that the boundaries of the object become imperceivable. Experiential consumption of the arts exists in many different forms physically and organizationally. The classical assumption of an arts experience is an indoor museum or gallery. Increasingly, this is changing, and exhibitions and installations can be found in a myriad of venues and nontraditional, sometimes unexpected, spaces. Art in public has never seemed more important (Yerebakan 2021). Before the realities of the pandemic, exhibition development and surrounding education had been shifting for years, with further advances into the virtual realm made possible by social media and new technological modalities. We have seen an additional shift beyond the traditional museum setting, with some institutions going past their own walls and venturing outdoors. The pandemic has proven a power strong enough to force rapid change, and some organizations have seen exponential growth and unexpected success by simply meeting the public where they can safely roam. Some organizational models have been operating in this way for decades, and while they, too, had to shift their strategies to reach those still at home, the encounters between the public and art that they could continue to foster have set the stage for a new future in experiential consumption that furthers the art market's migration towards liquid consumption.

Art Omi is a standout example, as the organization's outdoor exhibitions have remained open to the public throughout the pandemic. Originally founded in 1992 as an international artist residency program, the Art Omi campus has expanded to feature a 120-acre sculpture park, which welcomes the public daily, rain or shine—free of charge (Horvitz, Willows, and Kaghan 2011). While the spring of 2020 brought about countless challenges to daily life, Art Omi found itself in a unique position during the outbreak, as its primary attraction for the public was perhaps one of the safest venues remaining. Though the campus's visitor center and gallery were closed in strict accordance with health guidelines, the local community sought refuge in its rolling hills and spacious fields, which offered safe conditions for art viewing, ample social distancing, and a chance to simply enjoy nature (Mishanec 2020).

'As part of an overall strategy for maintaining mental and physical health during this time, authorities have been explicit about the need for people to take time outdoors on a daily basis,' reads the organization's website. 'Art Omi is fortunate to be able to provide a spacious environment for people to walk, breathe deep, and to see other people from a safe distance' (Mishanec 2020). Art Omi exists at the intersection of an arts experience and a stroll through the park and allows for comfortable viewing at one's own pace. Executive director Ruth Adams said to *Spectrum News* (Leigh 2020), 'Even at the worst times of the pandemic, just the idea that you can go somewhere to breathe and relax has been really meaningful. We feel really lucky to be able to offer an experience to the public during a time when a lot of arts organizations can't.'

Art Omi faced its share of local criticism and concern during this time. 'Some Ghent residents are questioning why Art Omi's sculpture park remains open despite the statewide closure of public gathering spaces, but the town says it will not close the private park. Art Omi has drawn a number of complaints, said Ghent Town Supervisor Michael Benvenuto. The Columbia County Health Department sent employees to the park and determined that social-distancing requirements are being met' (Mishanec 2020). Comparisons were made between the organization and state parks and the grounds of historic sites, which were also permitted to stay open, excluding any buildings.

In an otherwise shut-down New York, the need for respite brought many new visitors to Art Omi and outdoor spaces like it. The sculpture park can be used for dog walking and picnicking surrounded by a plethora of modern and contemporary pieces that inspire. Curator and project manager Nicole Hayes says of this unprecedented year in particular, 'Seeing visitors new to art open themselves to the experience was a highlight of the past year and a new frontier for the park. We lost so many planned events and programs, but we also gained an entirely new following of people from our community and further afield.'¹

As a non-collecting institution, Art Omi exhibits sculptures and architectural pavilions that are on loan for various periods, usually ranging from one to four years, with new installations each season. Following proper safety guidelines detailed by New York State and the Department of Health,



Figure 1. Agustina Woodgate, *The Source I, The Source II, The Source III, The Source IV*, 2019. Installed on the 14th of March 2020, Agustina Woodgate's *The Source* is a series of four functional water fountains, which marked the continuation of artwork installation for the Art Omi 2020 season. Two visitors can be seen enjoying the park (courtesy of Art Omi /Bryan Zimmerman)

the 2020 season was able to continue, and produced a robust grouping of new and recontextualized work. Artists and architects were able to install their work both remotely and on-site, and the addition of these new pieces was a source of excitement for visitors—those entirely new to the park, and the Art Omi faithful. 'Being able to engage and work directly with artists, to resume cultural production in the relative safety of the outdoors, was one of the most joyful times in 2020 for me,' Hayes (2020) said in an interview.²

In addition to highlighting the physical resource of the park and offering entirely virtual educational programming, Art Omi seized this opportunity to expand upon and digitize their current wayfinding strategies. Immediately, QR codes for virtual park maps and family-oriented audio tours were made available online and on-site. These supplemental tools could be enjoyed from the comfort of one's own home or on a smart device during one's visit.

Following the creation of entirely remote programs early on in the pandemic and the expansion of supplemental maps and audio resources, Art Omi: Education established a hybrid solution to regional summer camp restrictions. Camp Omi in a Box was an initiative that integrated remote learning with safe, socially distanced programming by providing everything young people needed for specialized art projects in a well-thought-out box, coupled with recorded lessons from the sculpture park, video meetings with teaching artists, and limited on-site interactions. Sicurella said that these thoughtful weekly boxes 'contain the spirit of Omi—art materials, illustrated prompts, and online interaction with Camp Omi instructors and counselors' (Leigh 2020). Each project was based on the work on view, inspiring families to make their own visits and make connections between their projects at home and the physical work before them.

Art Omi was in a unique position before this crisis and has utilized this standing of 'sanctuary' for both artists and the public alike, reaffirming the



Figure 2. Will Ryman, *Pac-Lab*, 2017. *Pac-Lab* is a labyrinth, designed to be interacted with, reminiscent of the retro video game *Pac-Man*. The walls are painted in primary colors that recall our childhood associations with art making, as well as the paintings of Piet Mondrian. Visitors can be seen safely traversing Ryman's cast-resin maze (courtesy of Art Omi /Bryan Zimmerman)



Figure 3. *Camp Omi in a Box*. Christine Flood, Assistant Director of Art Omi: Education, is seen displaying the contents of Art Omi's inaugural *Camp Omi in a Box*, a thoughtful solution for remote art-making. Each box contains school-age art supplies such as paints and crayons, project information for the coming week, and a family-oriented map to encourage safe visits to the park (courtesy of Art Omi /Bryan Zimmerman)

transformative quality of art. 'Art enhances people's lives. It comes in during these dark times and gives us meaning again. It can recreate joy when we're having a hard time finding it,' says Nicole Hayes in an interview with *Document Journal* (Blum 2020). Visitors have had countless new experiences at Art Omi since the outbreak, and based on social media activity, the organization has become a popular site for those seeking a unique post for their own feed. This

emphasizes art's experiential and spatial value, and the growing consumption of the whole, beyond the objects on view. 'For so many people, when their life shrank and slowed down, it opened up this space that they immediately filled with creativity,' Ruth Adams said while speaking with the *Times Union* (Weinstein 2020). 'That is such a sign of hope, and a reminder of how much the arts matter.'

Perhaps the best-known example of an outdoor art-viewing experience in this same region is the Storm King Art Center, an expansive, 500-acre property with monumental steel giants and thoughtful earthworks whose grounds are open to the public on a seasonal basis. Access is based on ticketed admission, and with pandemic restrictions and regulations, the art center had to strategize. Much like other art parks and outdoor venues, a day trip to this iconic sculpture park has become incredibly sought after. According to Tessa Solomon (2020), 'the art center has become a bona fide destination—tickets are now selling out weeks in advance, making Storm King one of the hottest New York art spaces right now.'

While Storm King charges an admission fee, and one must act fast to attend, its collection of both the permanent and the ephemeral continues to challenge the traditions of the art world and museum experience. Within its own exhibitions, contrasting values are at play: artworks range from Jeff Goldsworthy's over-two-thousand-foot-long *Storm King Wall* that elegantly flows through the park, seamlessly connecting art, history, and landscape to Maya Lin's seminal *Wave Field*, a former gravel pit, remnants of highway construction, now rolling earthen swells evoking the sea. These thoughtful works can be understood by visitors of varying backgrounds, allowing for a more accessible, inclusive art-viewing experience. Senior curator Nora Lawrence says of their ever-changing collection, 'We all want to continue to present people with what they've always loved about Storm King, but help evolve the idea of what outdoor sculpture can be.' For example, in Lawrence's words, Goldsworthy's *Storm King Wall*, the artist's first museum commission in the United States, 'really illustrated a way in which artists could ask how the art, nature, and the visitor experience could come together' (Solomon 2020). Reflecting on his construction at Storm King, Goldsworthy himself has said, 'Trees, stone, people—these are the ingredients of the place and the work' (Storm King Art Center 2020). Art encounters within these outdoor venues often blur the lines between the objects themselves and the landscape surrounding them, placing value on the spatial experience.

Visitor demographics at Storm King Art Center have changed over time, too, thanks in part to the evolution of social media and the importance of our daily digital lives. Aziz Ansari's Netflix production *Master of None* shows what the power of media can do to a museum's attendance, and is especially interesting for a venue of Storm King's nature and scale. An episode featuring the bright foliage and unique earthworks sparked new interest and increased attendance, and while newcomers 'might not know the name of Maya Lin's sculpture... they know that it's the hills' from *Master of None*, says Anthony Davidowitz, deputy director of operations, administration, and legal affairs for

Storm King Art Center (Indrisek 2017). Davidowitz describes a shift in 'diversity and demographics on site' as well, and it is clear from social media activity and users tagging the museum that the park is a prime location for the perfect eclectic selfie.

Visitors to these venues do not engage in traditional ownership of physical objects; instead, they possess a personal experience, taking home digital memories they create and spread. Nathan Jurgenson (2019) has described the phenomenon of the 'social photo,' brought about by people becoming 'constant tourists, looking for potential photographs,' ways to capture and share their experiences with others through our new most prevalent forms of communication. 'Life is experienced as increasingly documentable, and perhaps also experienced in the service of its documentation, always with the newly accessible audience in mind' (Jurgenson 2019: 31–32)—visitors are flocking to spaces that provide cultural enrichment, as well as engaging and aesthetic experiences, in which to take and share their social photography.

In addition to these sculpture parks, though, whose missions naturally place the public's experiential consumption outside, more traditional museums and galleries have found themselves venturing into alternative exhibition strategies as well. In the fall of 2020, the Clark Art Institute in idyllic Williamstown, Massachusetts found itself at the seemingly perfect time to open its first entirely outdoor exhibition, *Ground/work*. The Clark is a museum and research institution whose collections highlight American painting, masterworks from the Impressionist period, sculpture, works on paper, and decorative arts. Its 140-acre campus, located just down the road from Williams College, harbors fields and forests, with walking paths and wildlife to enjoy. According to the guest curators of *Ground/work*, Molly Epstein and Abigail Ross Goodman, 'the Clark has a unique and varied natural setting—woodland trails, open meadows, expansive vistas, cloistered areas for contemplation—that is open to the public day and night throughout the seasons without fee or mitigation: a highly rare offering to accompany a renowned permanent collection and research institution' (Keh 2020).

While the culmination of this first-ever grouping of outdoor art may seem serendipitous, the exhibition has been in the works for years—its opening during the pandemic was kismet. The show is an ongoing exhibition that deftly utilizes the Clark's sprawling campus of rolling hills and meadows to showcase new works by a cast of women sculptors. Director of the Clark Olivier Meslay says of the show, 'For *Ground/work*, our meadows and woodlands serve as a kind of natural "gallery," offering visitors the opportunity to venture beyond our institutional walls and contemplate vibrant and inspiring contemporary works set amid the remarkable natural beauty that surrounds them' (Keh 2020). *Ground/work* exhibits the work of renowned sculptors Kelly Akashi, Nairy Baghramian, Jennie C. Jones, Eva LeWitt, Analia Saban, and Haegue Yang, whose pieces 'respond to the Clark's unique setting while expressing ideas core to each artist's individual practice' (The Clark Art Institute, 2020). These six new works provide a first glimpse into the Clark's curatorial vision's potential as it ventures farther from its walls and into the landscape.

Cool Hunting describes the exhibition as a 'non-prescriptive, non-hierarchical experience, wherein guests are welcome to explore the sculptures at their own pace' (Graver 2020), emphasizing the varied experience of attendance and consumption.

Much like the uncertainty of the 2020 season at Art Omi, the installation of the Clark's outdoor exhibition was not without its own challenges and delays. Whereas *Ground/work* was intended to be opened at once, initially in the spring, the artwork was installed over a long period of time, with visitors able to experience installation processes at certain points of the summer. In a review in *The Boston Globe*, critic Murray Whyte noted of his own experience that 'one (artist) was still waiting to arrive,' just another trial faced by the art world this past year (Whyte 2020). However, this process went on to further connect the public with the work, tearing down the barriers typically found within the museum space, even in the Clark's own galleries. An indoor installation is barricaded off, hidden from the masses as the work goes up and comes down. With public art, however, especially that which is installed over an entire summer, the occasional passerby can have an entirely new experience of art viewing.

While the indoor galleries of the Clark require standard, paid admission through pre-registration and timed tickets available online, walkers are welcome to enjoy the pastoral landscape free of charge, and can now expect to encounter new, inspired works. Once a near secret known only to fans of the museum and Williamstown locals, the grounds are now drawing in an entirely new audience and growing in popularity much like established sculpture parks such as Storm King and Art Omi. *Ground/work* can be viewed until October of 2021 at any time of the day or night and is sure to entice increased patronage as the need for outdoor experiences continues into this new year and beyond. Additionally, according to *Cool Hunting*, a vehicle dedicated to the exhibition makes the Clark's grounds accessible to visitors with mobility impairments, allowing for an inclusive art-viewing experience (Graver 2020). This exhibition sets the stage for future programming on an impressive, public scale, setting a precedent for all museums whose campuses may not be utilized to their fullest potential and moving us towards a field where art is a free, public good.

Bishop Castle, like these other arts institutions, did not appear recently. It was built largely by hand by one person over the course of fifty years: Jim Bishop, a welder from Colorado Springs who bought a piece of land in the San Isabel Forest and, in 1969, began building a castle for his wife, Phoebe (Bishop Castle 2021). The building is still dedicated to her and now serves as the repository of her ashes.³ In that way, it might be considered Colorado's Taj Mahal. It certainly counts as one of the state's most beloved buildings, and one of the only ones where the building itself is the primary attraction. Like the grounds of the Clark or the sculpture park of Art Omi, it is free and open to the public. Unlike Art Omi, in particular, climbing at Bishop Castle is permitted at one's own risk. That defines the primary ethos of Bishop Castle: you enter it at your own risk, which is not inconsiderable. This is possibly the

least Americans with Disabilities Act—compatible building in the entire United States. There are balconies with no railings where you can just walk off. When you reach one of the upper towers, a hand-painted sign urges you not to shake the structure, as it might fall down.



Figure 4. Bishop Castle. The dragon's head can breathe fire (courtesy of Jeffrey Taylor)

There is no entrance fee, no ticket booth, and one can pretty much enter any time of day or night. Rising 16 stories high, or 160 feet (49 meters), Bishop ultimately plans it to reach 250 feet (76 meters) (Calhoun 2015). Constructed with stones gathered on public lands and his own wrought ironwork, it may be the largest building built by a single person in the world—created by a high school dropout (Atlas Obscura 2016). The architecture has been described as a cross between a Tim Burton film and a Dr. Seuss book (Dahlberg 2020) and features a fire-breathing dragon head (Cook 2016).

Throughout the structure, Bishop has placed his hand-painted manifestos on particleboard leaning against the walls. He holds particular contempt for the government, especially when it regulates his activity. For example, one sign argues: 'THE LOCAL GOVT. DON'T WANT YOU PEOPLE TO ENJOY THIS FREE ATTRACTION FOR MANY YEARS THEY TRIED BUT FAILED TO OPPRESS AND CONTROL MY GOD GIVEN TALENT TO HAND BUILD THIS GREAT MONUMENT TO HARD WORKING POOR PEOPLE ALWAYS OPEN FREE!' One sign has this to say about fire bans: 'By what rights can our government strip us of our rights? If we let our government take fire, what freedoms will they



Figure 5. Bishop Castle. Hand-painted sign warning not to shake the structure (courtesy of Jeffrey Taylor)

demand their slaves to sacrifice next?' (Lone Star Drift 2019). Prior to COVID-19, these signs might have simply appeared to visitors as comical elements of local color. Despite the fact that these texts long predate the rise of Q-Anon and COVID skepticism, and that Mr. Bishop never participated in any of the recent incarnations of anti-governmental white nationalism, the discourse they represent has now become significantly more threatening after the assault on the Capitol on the 6th of January 2021.

Preserving its unregulated freedom and openness to the public during the COVID-19 crisis, Bishop Castle became, like Art Omi and the grounds of the Clark, one of the few cultural sites available to the public. The legendary roadside attraction's egalitarian approach of creating wonder for all means that on any given day it will see a caravan of visitors, scores of Subarus of the Mountain West intelligentsia parked alongside the Make America Great Again crowd's Harley Davidsons. Therefore, Bishop Castle may, in its own guerilla DIY ethos, be providing a fertile ground for the reconciliation of an ever more divided nation. In the way Mr. Bishop intended, his creation freely gives itself to a public desperate for aesthetic interaction that defies the hierarchies and silos of the pre-COVID-19 art regimes.

The castle has a pair of towers that each rise nearly 50 meters and are bridged at the top by a walkway of welded wrought iron and wire. As visitors step out onto this fragile, almost invisible lattice, a sign warns them, 'DON'T SHAKE AND RUIN THIS IRON WORK IT COULD COLLAPSE!' At this point, one



Figure 6. Bishop Castle. View from one of the upper towers at a height of approximately 160 feet (49 meters) (courtesy of Jeffrey Taylor)

is reminded that you are alone with this man's creation, unmediated by the government, regulators, administrators, gallerists, or tastemakers. The smaller tower to which the ironwork crosses over has been designed to be the resting spot for Phoebe Bishop's ashes, and it makes the metaphor of passing over to a new afterlife visible. One's location on this almost ethereal bridge also mirrors the transition point to which the COVID-19 crisis has brought us: one where the inherited relations, long considered immutable, between art, objects, and financial capital have begun to loosen.

The old art world relied on a formula under which objects were imbued with artistic authorship and simultaneously monetary value, and that formula has now reached a series of paradigm shifts so significant it sometimes feels as if quantum physics has been injected into an art market designed for Newtonian physics. In the case of NFTs, the art market remains, but the object, and, for that matter, the work of art, is disappearing. Sites for experiencing art such as Art Omi and Bishop Castle de-commodified access to objects integrated into their environment, allowing for rarified interaction with the dematerialized intentions of the works' creators. Art markets are disengaging from art and art is disengaging from objects.

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