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CULTURE **FINE ART**

What Are Art Galleries For?

Three artists on the future of the gallery system after Covid-19.

By [Barry Schwabsky](#)

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The Orsay museum on its reopening day, in June, as France eases lockdown measures taken to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. (Photo by Thomas Coex / AFP via Getty Images)

The gallery scene in New York, long the most active setting for new art worldwide, had been showing signs of malaise even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of its problems are shared around the globe—notably the rise of

art fairs, which have increased the cost of doing business while drawing many collectors away from brick-and-mortar galleries; other challenges, such as high rents, are more specific to New York. All of them are rooted in a broader sociopolitical context: the seemingly inexorable rise of income inequality and the winner-take-all economy. One result has been consolidation of the art market around a small number of mega-galleries and a squeeze on the rest. And when the galleries are ailing, it's the artists who are most affected.

There's no reason why the art gallery as we know it, a 19th century invention, should last forever. But there's also no sign of an alternative on the horizon. As with other small New York businesses that've been closed since mid-March, it's not clear how many galleries will be able to hold out long enough to reopen. (When I began writing this, galleries had begun to reopen in Berlin, Paris, and elsewhere with proper protection, but no clear date for reopening had been set for those in New York; now the latter have started reopening, still mostly, it seems, by appointment.) For now, artists depend on galleries, if not for subsistence—few have ever been able to live entirely from the sale of their work—then to make their work known, to cultivate a public for it.

The pandemic has not put an end to all gallery activity, though: Galleries are going gangbusters trying to keep their constituencies involved online. My inbox has never been more full of frantic appeals for attention. Galleries that used to send out announcements a couple of times a month now seem to reach out on a daily basis, asking me to check out their highlighted work of the day, to peruse their “online viewing rooms,” or to join the audience for a virtual studio

visit with one of their quarantined artists. I'm having none of it. I'll be happy to bide my time and wait until I can safely see real things in real three-dimensional space.

Suddenly, I find myself no longer taking for granted the existence of the galleries where I've been enjoying art for most of my life. Suddenly it's a question: What are galleries for, anyway? And what's going to become of them in the new world that's going to appear in the wake of Covid-19? Art is always about putting our habitual perceptions on hold and taking another look. Galleries, in this moment of reset, of relative nonproductivity, need to reconsider their assumptions, and artists likewise, to rethink their expectations of galleries.

Already, the nature of the relation between galleries and artists varies so widely that it is hard to generalize. In some cases, the gallery "represents" the artist—meaning, it has the ongoing exclusive right to sell their work; this representation could be in effect in a given city or country or it could be globally. Or the gallery might exhibit an artist's work on a one-time basis, with just a limited number of pieces consigned for sale. Usually, the income from a sale will be split 50/50 between the gallery and the artist, although some artists whose work is in particular demand can obtain a more favorable split. Rarer than it used to be, I think, is for the gallery to pay the artist a regular stipend in exchange for work or for the right to sell it. Up for negotiation as well between artist and gallery are all the ancillary expenses involved in mounting and publicizing an exhibition: shipping, photographic documentation, storage, and so on. And big installations, like some moving image works, entail big production expenses. Who covers them—and, if that is

the gallery, how they are to recoup the outlay—has to be worked out.

Except at the higher strata of the market, these issues are often settled with a handshake rather than a written contract, leaving lots of room for ambiguity and after-the-fact disagreement. What makes it worthwhile for the artist—when it is worthwhile—is not only that the overhead for the exhibition space is covered, but that the gallery has closer and more extensive contacts among collectors and museum curators who might be interested in acquiring or showing the work, not to mention other dealers who could help sell it (for an appropriate split). In short, the artist gives up a large portion of the sales price of the work on the assumption, or the hope, that the gallery can increase both the number of sales and their prices. It's not always a winning bet, but simply having had the exhibition accords a degree of prestige and publicity that may eventually pay off. Like a writer who can say, "my publisher," or a musician who can say, "my label," the artist who can say "my gallery" has a sense of being in the game. The dealer serves the artist as some combination of cheerleader, business manager, and therapist, browbeating boss, and obliging servitor; it's a business relationship that's also a personal one, fraught with sometimes hidden, sometimes open conflicts.

To understand what galleries are and might become, I needed to talk to some of the people whose interests they ostensibly exist to serve: artists themselves. In particular, it occurred to me, it might be good to talk to some artists who've been involved in the gallery scene in New York but who are currently not represented by galleries here. How does the gallery system look to them these days? Are

galleries fulfilling artists' needs? Do galleries need to change, and if so how?



Rhona Bitner's "Ghost Light," 2020. (*Rhona Bitner / ADAGP*)

I called on three artists whose work I admire but who otherwise have nothing in common. They're of different generations, and they work with different mediums. Rafael Vega is a painter born in Yabucoa, Puerto Rico, and these days living in Brooklyn—and still, even in the middle of the pandemic, able to get to his nearby studio and keep working.

He has exhibited his abstract works with galleries in New York and San Juan. Unusually, he studied industrial chemistry before going back to school for a degree in art. His paintings are elegant, funky, and physical—sawing lines through the wood panels he works on is as much a part of his painting process as is putting paint on them.

Rhona Bitner is a native New Yorker who spends part of every year in Paris. Her photographs have been exhibited in galleries and museums in those cities as well as in Geneva, Venice, and elsewhere. Her most extensive photographic project so far has been *Listen*, for which she spent over a decade on what she calls “a comprehensive mapping of American music’s inner architecture” through images of iconic music venues, from Max Yasgur’s farm in Bethel, N.Y.—the site of the Woodstock festival—and California’s Folsom State Prison where Johnny Cash recorded one of his most famous albums before an audience of inmates, to Manhattan’s CBGB, the club where punk rock was born, and historic blues venues like Red’s Lounge in Clarksdale, Miss. Since recovering from a bout with the coronavirus, Bitner has been photographing the deserted streets of her hometown in the first images she’s ever made in black-and-white. She admits that she doesn’t entirely know what to make of these new photos, but she was compelled to seek them out. “Someone told me, ‘It looks like a portrait of a city yearning for its inhabitants.’”

Judith Barry, an Ohioan by birth, lives in New York but commutes to Cambridge, Mass., where she is director of the ACT (art, culture and technology) program at MIT. She has exhibited her performance, installation, sculpture, and media works worldwide, including, most recently, solo shows at the

Mary Boone Gallery in New York and the Isabella Stewart

Gardner Museum in Boston. She has also worked as an exhibition designer, often in collaboration with her life partner, architect Ken Saylor. Since the gallery and museum closings, some of her big projects have been put on pause while her teaching duties have migrated online, but her drawing and other preparatory work continue for future projects such as *All the light that's ours to see*, an installation that reconsiders the history of home video and the transmutation of moving image culture as it became incorporated into domestic space.

Each of these artists has experienced the gallery system differently. For Vega, growing up in Puerto Rico, it was something he became aware of only gradually. “I’m from the southeast of the island. We don’t have galleries in that whole area. If you start studying art, the last thing you know or you understand or you care about is galleries. You do it because you like it. Then I moved to San Juan and got to know the gallery system in San Juan.” But it didn’t seem urgent to him at first to find a gallery. That only happened later, when he went to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I met him, and moved to New York after completing his degree..



Judith Barry's "All the light that's ours to see," 2020. *(Courtesy of the artist)*

Having grown up in New York, Bitner found the art scene closer to hand. "I have a sort of idealized version of what a gallery can be. Every artist wants to work with the Paula Cooper of the 1970s. That doesn't exist anymore." She doesn't feel she's had a satisfactory relation with a gallery, one that embodies the kind of supportive partnership she'd like. "An old friend who is now a very successful gallerist once put it in my head to say to dealers, 'What can I do to help you help us?' That makes a lot of sense, because I bring something to the table, they bring something to the table—our goals are similar, our existences are separate, but we can achieve something together. That is possible, because artists are succeeding within the gallery system." She's still looking for that kind of partnership.

Barry, coming into the art world toward the end of the 1970s, found things simpler. She was invited to show in biennials and other big international exhibitions almost before she knew it. "You were plucked out of school and given a budget to produce work—this was my de facto residency period. Yes, you made mistakes in public. But you made a lot of work

because you had a budget. You weren't working three jobs to pay two rents—home and studio, plus work expenses.”

Galleries took an early interest too, but “it was a special kind of gallery who wanted to show” someone like Barry, whose experimental work is not often the type that attracts collectors. But sales are not necessarily the point. “I’ve had dealers who really love to sell and others who really don’t like it,” says Barry:

You're with a gallery for a variety of reasons and it's not always about selling. What galleries do really well is give you a context and that most important thing, the chance to exhibit your work. Not having a gallery means a lot of your work isn't seen. That was often my case in New York, where for long periods I didn't have a gallery. You have to recognize what they can and cannot do. They can't make a market for you if there's no market. They can't get someone to write about your work if there's no one who's interested in writing about it.

Indeed, sales seem to be among the less relevant aspects of many artists' relations with galleries. “I don't know anyone who lives off the sale of their artwork,” Bitner says. “I don't ever expect to live off the sale of my artwork.” Teaching, as in Barry's case, is one of the common ways of making up the difference. A photographer like Bitner can take commercial commissions. Or they can work for the gallery system itself. Vega tells me that he doesn't think that artists in New York at his level, or at almost any level, live exclusively from selling their art. Many, instead, have day jobs in the art-world industrial complex as “art handlers, preparators for galleries or museums.” It's precisely through the loss of such jobs, often part-time or freelance, rather than through lost sales,

that the Covid-19 crisis has struck them hardest. “What do I expect from a gallery? Building a career,” says Vega. “It’s not necessarily about selling the work. That’s the easy part. The hard part is building the momentum that allows you to sell the painting: making people understand *why* they should buy the work.”

But there’s also a worry that the gallery’s demands can skew the artist’s work. “My friends who have galleries have a certain amount of pressure on them to show every two years or three years,” Bitner explains. “Part of the reason why I left the gallery system, or eluded the gallery system, is that there is no way I could have made a thirteen-year body of work like *Listen* under those conditions. None of my work fits that mold, and I don’t think I could make art within those parameters.” Vega, too, sees galleries as a pressure on the artist: “If you really, really want to be in a gallery, you have to understand that it’s a real intense experience. You have to forget about being in the studio and working uninterrupted. Half your life will probably be spent on the phone or on the computer, dealing with stuff that’s not immediately related to making your work.”

Vega understands that entering a relationship with a gallery is a calculated trade-off. Dealers sometimes push artists to produce more of what they’ve already been able to sell, rather than encouraging them to experiment freely. “You decided to dance with them, but you should be aware of how much you are willing to compromise. Does that mean I let them tell me, do ten of this size, ten of this other size, ten of that color, ten of that other color? Are you willing to do that? ‘You can dance but you can’t kiss!’ And if you decide you can’t kiss, you have to understand that you might be dropped.”



Rafael Vega's "Untitled," 2020. (Courtesy of the Artist)

Then it's time to try to find a new dealer—and for an artist who is not so well-established, that can take a long time. “That’s where I’m putting my money now: someday I will be discovered, when I’m close to my nineties,” he says.

What lies ahead for galleries is unpredictable, but it's sure to be challenging. Barry characterizes it as an ecosystem with “a delicate balance that is complex, and constantly changing. This is one of those moments where

things are out of balance. Partially, it's the rise of capital post 9/11. Despite the 2008 recession, the art market has grown exponentially, and is global," she says. It's not only Covid-19 that has revealed the need for the market to find a new balance. One correction may result from the art fairs losing some of their appeal—suddenly the crowds that thronged them don't seem so appealing. A well-known collector recently explained his newfound reluctance to attend any more fairs to *The New York Times*: "The most active and voracious collectors that I know are aged between their 50s and 80s. That's the demographic that's most vulnerable in the current health crisis." A sparsely populated gallery feels safer. As a result, Bitner predicts, "things will become more localized. We all remember those moments when we walked in and saw something breathtaking, a painting, a sculpture, *here*, that really hit home. That's what we're here to make and what galleries are here to show." Many galleries may not survive the crisis, but those that do will have to be more creative in their thinking, and perhaps smaller and more nimble as well as more collaborative in their ways of working.

Yet alongside this possible return to a smaller scale, local, and intimate gallery scene, the internet beckons. Vega sees the current situation as one in which galleries are trying to understand how and how much of their business can be shifted online—and he's skeptical, at least as far as his own work is concerned. "Can painting be enjoyed, can you achieve the same level of enjoyment seeing an icon of a painting on a desktop?" he asks. "Yes, the galleries can use the digital space to make transactions, to buy and sell, but that's different from experiencing the work of art. Like it or not, we need physical space to show those objects, because

[paintings] exist in a real time and place. At least for now, I don't see how online shows can do the same thing: It's mediated by a small screen, whether a cell phone or a computer. It's an image, perfect, but where is the picture?"

Bitner is more sanguine about this trend. "We were on this path already, the domination of technology—the whole world, not only the art world. All the pandemic has done is accelerate it," she points out. "But some of these online presentations are not uninteresting"—pointing as an example to a "virtual tour" of the sculptor Richard Rezac's exhibition on the website of his New York gallery, Luhring Augustine. Some artists, as she says, are already making work for new technology—for onscreen viewing: "More power to them!" She hopes that the innovations necessary for galleries' survival will entail "a more transparent, slower way of working—more democracy and inclusion, which is so overdue. Maybe the artists who should really be included will be included, maybe it won't be just the same ten white male artists anymore. I hope so, because it's essential, it's necessary now." If Bitner's optimism proves to be justified, it will be just because of this painful hiatus in business as usual.

Barry Schwabsky is the art critic of *The Nation*.

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