

# Artists in Isolation Make a New Window on the World

Cut off by a pandemic, not by choice, they renegotiate their relationships with art and audience.



“I am an artist, which means I’m inherently resilient,” said the artist Mark Dion, shown at Galveston Island State Park in Texas. “Artists are nothing if not adaptable.” Dornith Doherty

By James Prosek

Oct. 23, 2020

*This article is part of our latest [Fine Arts & Exhibits special report](#), which focuses on how art endures and inspires, even in the darkest of times.*

For centuries, artists and poets have escaped the world of people by choice, opting out to find clarity or to see from a different perspective. The earliest drawings known to have been made by humans have been found in the deep, dark recesses of caves, spaces since supplanted by the modern studio.

But many artists have very social sides to their lives and practices as well — exhibiting work, lecturing, attending openings — that have largely stopped as they, and everyone else, have been forced into involuntary isolation by the pandemic.

For some, along with that separation has come a kind of acceptance of a new set of limits, among them the inability to travel freely and a change in how they interact with people, places and objects.

“My work is all about context, about place,” the artist Mark Dion said recently. “I go someplace, and I listen to the site and I start to research its ecological history, its architecture, its material culture, its social history. All of those elements tell me what to do.”

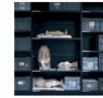
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Mr. Dion, who is based in Copake, N.Y., is known for his cabinet-of-curiosity type installations that often pull from institutional collections as well as junk shops — high and low conspiring to make arresting amalgams of human detritus.

“But I am an artist, which means I’m inherently resilient,” he said. “Artists are nothing if not adaptable, and in the end, I don’t necessarily need airplanes and research and a different location and a budget; all I need is a pencil and paper.”

When Mr. Dion’s [show](#) at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth shut down two months early, he realized the importance of his works being represented in other media. The book and film associated with the show became critical — if only because the public could not experience his work in person. (The exhibition was extended for a few weeks, when the museum reopened.)

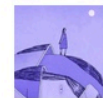
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A vial of gum collected by Mr. Dion in Texas in July 2018. Mark Dion, via the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

During the virus, many artists have been returning to the basics, working alone without assistants, slowing down and taking a closer look at their immediate surroundings, spending more time in nature. But as they have turned inward, there has also been a renaissance of communication, of sharing ideas through digital media.

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On March 17, [Phong Bui](#), an artist and publisher, and his team at the publication he co-founded, The Brooklyn Rail, started a series of daily lunchtime conversations, called the New Social Environment, through Zoom.

“‘Social Environment’ was a direct counter to social distancing,” Mr. Bui told me. The conversations — there have been more than 150 so far, [archived](#) online — are a nod to the artist Joseph Beuys’s concept of [Social Sculpture](#), where artmaking is not considered to be so precious, but is democratized, a part of our lives.

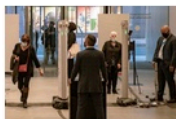
As the daily conversations progressed — bringing together both well-known and emerging artists, musicians, poets, curators, and museum directors — the staff and participants noticed a magic to this new medium, with everyone in their individual Zoom box, a slice of their homes or studios visible behind them.

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“I didn’t expect people to feel so incredibly compassionate, sympathetic and honest,” Mr. Bui said. “What we learned is that the need to connect to other human beings was amplified.”

Zoom and other technologies existed before the virus, but we weren't being forced to use them. For Joseph Grigely, who is deaf, this shift has been a boon.

"Pre-Covid, people might pick up the phone, email or meet in person," Mr. Grigely told me via Zoom, using the chat feature to type, and with his wife, the artist Amy Vogel, signing for him. "Post-Covid, we're meeting all over the globe via Zoom, we are seeing and hearing people, we are seeing and having conversations that are embodied — the face, the facial expressions."

Mr. Grigely, an artist and a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has been deaf since he was 10, shocked into a kind of involuntary isolation brought on by an accident. He deals with such a situation, like the coronavirus, through what he calls "intercoming," rather than "overcoming."

"At the moment you can't really beat the virus, you have to work with the circumstances that we have," he said.



A work in progress by the artist Joseph Grigely for the exhibition "Higher! Higher! Lower, Lower. Louder! Louder! Softer, Softer" at the Shimmer exhibition space in Rotterdam. Joseph Grigely

Mr. Grigely's work is largely about communication, about living as a deaf person in the world of the hearing. He has held many conversations by passing [notes](#) back and forth with others, and he displays these notes as large wall installations. "These are ordinary conversations you would not ever bother to document or display," he said, but there is a kind of revelation about their everyday ordinariness that is captivating when you see them together.

“I see in Covid a lot of people are doing something like that; they are looking at what’s on their desks, what’s on their bookshelves. This kind of slow-life process, it’s something that’s between the still life and life. We’re all in that slow mode now, it seems.”

At the very beginning of lockdown, Mr. Grigely encouraged his students to embrace new technologies, seeing these media as a way to stay optimistic through a challenging time. “The way the students are disseminating work on Instagram or exhibitions that are posted online, to me it seems to supplement a body of work, not replace it. They create multiple entry points to it; you look into it through these different angles.”

“At the same time,” he noted, they have come “at the expense of how many lives? It’s very painful to look at what’s happening in that context.”

As an artist, I, too, know the isolation of the virus. An [exhibition](#) at the Yale University Art Gallery that I worked on for over two years closed in mid-March, three weeks after it began. It reopened last month, and then was temporarily closed again, with plans to reopen and continue its run through February.



“Paradise Lost, Ponape” (2020) by James Prosek. James Prosek and Waqas Wajahat, New York

Isolation for me, in my studio in Easton, Conn., has above all emphasized a heightened relationship to nature, and the continued relevance of the elemental, primitive materials of my craft — wood-handled brushes with animal hair bristles, pigments ground from minerals, charcoal, graphite. I marvel at how efficiently, even in the face of new technologies, these ancient tools still enable us to manifest thoughts, to get something out of our heads and onto a surface.

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My own paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations have always been fundamentally about the interface of the real and the imagined, the actual and the imitation, and the interconnectedness between our thoughts and ourselves.

Isolation has made me look more closely at the nature of representation, a theme of the Yale show, and a theme of many of the conversations I had with artists: why humans bothered to depict things in nature, and how once we were able to do so, these representations helped us survive.

We cannot lament the virtual world; that would not serve us. As Mr. Grigely noted, these new forms of representation don't detract from the actual, but augment it. It's possible that when the first human drew a bison on a cave wall, someone was there thinking: "That's a neat bit of artifice, but I much prefer the real thing."

But the representation gave us the beginning of a secondary nature, one that complements the real one, and helps us navigate it, like a map. It also helped expand our minds in an imaginary world.

As we fully return to seeing art in person, I hope that our experiences in isolation will allow us to pay more attention to what is around us — when we look up from our screens.

