

# The Most Important Moments in Art in 2020

This was a year of protests and pivots. Monuments fell, museums looked inward. On the bright side, galleries persisted despite the pandemic's grip and curators rolled out magisterial retrospectives.

By **Holland Cotter**, **Roberta Smith** and **Jason Farago**

Dec. 4, 2020 Updated 9:35 a.m. ET

[Holland Cotter](#) | [Roberta Smith](#) | [Jason Farago](#)

HOLLAND COTTER

## No Longer Business as Usual

The year was a 12-month stress test. When I asked friends “how are you?” the repeat answers came: “anxious,” “depressed,” “bored.” The first two I could relate to, but bored is something I rarely am. As a journalist, I’m addicted to art-specific information, to taking it in, parsing it, sorting it, trying to make sense of it. And there’s been a ton of it this year, all pretty intense. So as long as I’ve had a laptop, a home library, and at least some access to “live” art, I’ve been OK in lockdown mode. Here are some things that have kept me focused.

### 1. Best in Show

Art, fundamentally, is information. It’s as much about issues as about objects, about how we live and think, ethically, politically, emotionally. This has been clear in exhibitions that have expanded our knowledge of what’s in the world, near and far. Among those I revisit in my mind are “Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; “Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration” at MoMA PS1; and “Sky Hopinka: Centers of Somewhere” at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College. And to those, I’ll add three Manhattan gallery shows: a museum-ready survey of portraits by the still-undersung Benny Andrews at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery; a solo of work by Frederick Weston (1946-2020) at the Ace Hotel; and, at David Lewis Gallery, a reconstruction of rooms from the Los Angeles home of the reclusive artist and filmmaker John Boskovich (1956-2006), who called his living room the “Psycho Salon” and made it a rousing place to shelter.



The Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond, Va. was among the public art projects that came under scrutiny after George Floyd died in police custody in May. Protesters reclaimed the site by decorating the statue's pedestal with Black Lives Matter slogans and memorials to victims of police violence. Steve Helber/Associated Press

### 2. Monuments

And there were objects that projected information loud and clear, as was the case with commemorative political monuments after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Two that made news this year were in Virginia. In Richmond, protesters transformed a colossal statue of Robert E. Lee into a jubilant paean to Black Lives Matter. And in Charlottesville, the scene of a violent 2017 Unite the

Right rally, a new “Memorial to Enslaved Laborers” was installed at the University of Virginia, on a campus famously designed by Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder, and built, brick by brick, by enslaved Black people.

### 3. Museums

The lockdown created dire economic crises for art institutions. Possibly even more destabilizing and harder to address long-term was the mounting pressure on museums to conduct moral self-inventories and to begin correcting systemic racial and social inequities. In the event, the learning curve for reform wasn’t just steep; it was a roller coaster.

Last May the Baltimore Museum of Art planned to auction works from its collection to pay for — among other things — equitable staff salaries, only to be hit by a firestorm of protests. A few months later, four museums collaborating on a Philip Guston survey — the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Tate Modern — were critically slammed when they decided to postpone and rethink a show that included some of that artist’s Ku Klux Klan-derived imagery.

In both cases, art institutions had legitimate arguments to make, but didn’t make them convincingly, and had to pull back. The Baltimore Museum dropped its auction plans, at least for the present. And, in a compromise gesture, the Guston postponement was reduced to two years from four. What a workshopping of the show will produce remains to be seen. But one thing is certain: our major museums now have two-year gaps in their exhibition schedules. How about filling those gaps with art that, unlike Guston’s, is nonwhite, nonmale, and noncanonical, an option that might have been considered from the start.

### 4. Organizing

Following staff layoffs during the pandemic, art institutions felt pressure from inside too. This year, continuing a trend from 2019, museum workers, voicing grievances based on racial discrimination and economic exploitation, have increasingly sought to unionize. In some cases, the efforts have gone smoothly. In others they’ve hit pushback. Together the results prove two facts: Institutions long assumed to represent the best in us can also represent the worst; and solidarity works.



Three of 26 sculptures at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris that the French government agreed to return to Benin. The objects were taken by French troops in the late 19th century. Christophe Petit Tesson/EPA, via Shutterstock

### 5. Restitution

After three years of foot-dragging, the French Senate signed off on a bill in November promising to return a group of looted objects to Africa: 26 sculptures, now held by the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, will go back to Benin, and a sword (on loan from France’s Army Hospital to the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar) will be permanently repatriated to Senegal. But the returns feel dutiful and small. A 2018 report commissioned by President Emmanuel Macron of France estimated that some 90,000 African works are in French collections. “African heritage cannot be a prisoner of European museums,” Mr. Macron said. But clearly it still is, which made the news that the architect David Adjaye was designing a museum in Nigeria specifically to house returned objects most welcome.



“Standing Rock Awakens the World” (2019), the title piece in an exhibition of the works of Edgar Heap of Birds earlier this year at Fort Gansevoort in Manhattan. Hock E Aye Vi  
Edgar Heap of Birds and Fort Gansevoort

## 6. Indigenous Presence

A concentration of Indigenous artists lit up New York galleries and museums this year. They included, along with Sky Hopinka at Bard, Edgar Heap of Birds (Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho) at Fort Gansevoort; Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit and Unangan) at Peter Blum; Jeffrey Gibson (Choctaw and Cherokee) at the Brooklyn Museum; and the Indigenous Canadian painter Kent Monkman (Cree) at the Met. In addition, the Met, which stands on Lenape homelands, hired Patricia Marroquin Norby (Purépecha Indigenous Mexican) as its first full-time Native American curator.

## 7. Latino Now

Latinos constitute the second largest ethnic and racial group in the nation. They’re a powerful political and cultural force (some have embraced the gender-neutral term Latinx), yet look for them in our big museums and you’ll barely find them. This past July, after years of advocacy, a bill proposing the establishment of a National Museum of the American Latino in Washington was finally passed by the House of Representatives. Once the Senate and the president sign off, it’s a done deal. That deal should be sealed, and soon.



Hemp rope sculptures by Mrinalini Mukherjee at the Met Breuer in 2019. From left, “Basanti (She of Spring),” 1984; “Yakshi (Female Forest Deity),” 1984; “Pakshi (Bird),” 1985; “Rudra (Deity of Terror),” 1982; and “Devi (Goddess),” 1982. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

## 8. Goodbye, Met Breuer

The Met's experiment in off-site expansion closed with the March lockdown and never reopened. I wonder how many people noticed. In reality, projects never really achieved liftoff. Attendance stayed low. Critical reception was tepid. There was a lingering sense that the Met itself was relieved to see it go. (The Frick will take over the lease next year.) Yet, without the Breuer we would have missed important shows, ones that no other New York City museum was willing or able to offer. Superb career surveys of Siah Armajani, Kerry James Marshall, Marisa Merz, Nasreen Mohamedi, Mrinalini Mukherjee and Lygia Pape led the list.

## 9. Voices

I was heartened this year to follow the work of a new generation of sharp-minded art writers, among them Hannah Black, Nikki Columbus and Tobi Haslett, and to read the emphatically cleareyed commentary of the artist Coco Fusco. The voice I missed was that of the art historian and curator Maurice Berger, who had for more than three decades been taking the pulse of America's racial politics as reflected in art and its institutions. He died in March, at 63, of complications from Covid-19.

## 10. The Great Outdoors

Given the closures and stretches of stay-home quarantine, it makes sense that a lot of the season's most memorable art was open-air. Who could forget the words "Black Lives Matter" painted, huge and in caution-yellow, on the street in front of the White House and before Trump Tower in Manhattan? In advance of the 2020 election, the online site called "Art at a Time Like This," founded by Barbara Pollack and Anne Verhallen, collaborated with SaveArtSpace to place politically pointed billboards by 20 artists — among them Sue Coe, Abigail DeVille and Dread Scott — throughout New York City's five boroughs. And a collective of artists, led by Frank Sabatté, a priest and textile artist, associated with St. Paul the Apostle Church on Manhattan's West Side installed their annual exhibition not inside the church but on the railings outside it, where the public could see it in safety and nature — weather and time — could determine when the show would end.

---

**THE T LIST:** *A weekly roundup of what the editors of T Magazine are noticing and coveting right now.*

[Sign Up](#)

ROBERTA SMITH

# Persistence in the Face of a Pandemic

The main story everywhere this year was the coronavirus: how it disrupted or reshaped specific spheres of activity, or left parts of them largely unscathed. The art world witnessed dizzying combinations of these outcomes, which are still unfolding. One surprise was the almost instantaneous financial fragility of museums and the stalwartness of art galleries of all shapes and sizes. When the virus arrived, an especially strong art season had been underway.



Noah Davis's "The Casting Call" (2008) was featured in an exhibition of the artist's work at David Zwirner gallery in New York. The Estate of Noah Davis

## 1. 'Noah Davis'

An early sign of the New Year's strengths was a solemnly beautiful survey of the truncated career of the painter Noah Davis (1983-2015) at David Zwirner in mid-January. Davis combined realist figuration with touches of painterliness and color that added a resonant symbolism and elegiac calm to his scenes of almost-everyday African-American life. The display came to seem like the start of an amazing run of gallery shows by Black artists this season. They included Walter Price at Greene Naftali; Titus Kaphar at Gagolian; Ficare Ghebreyesus at Galerie Lelong; Leilah Babirye at Gordon Robichaux; Jonathan Lyndon Chase at Baby Company; Gideon Appah at Mitchell-Innes & Nash; Tschabalala Self at Eva Presenhuber (through Dec. 19); Nina Chanel Abney at Jack Shainman (through Dec. 23); and Theaster Gates at Gagolian (through Jan. 23, 2021). And reigning over them all is "Rope/Fire/Water," an overdue survey of Howardena Pindell's alternating forays into abstract painting and politics at the Shed (through April 11).



An untitled quilt by Rosie Lee Tompkins from 1996 that combines pieces of a dish towel, sections of the American flag and a religious tapestry. UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Eli Leon Bequest

## 2. 'Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective'

In Northern California, before the coronavirus lockdown, a life-changing, history-altering exhibition was briefly available at the University of California Berkeley Art Museum: the first full retrospective of the great quilt-artist Rosie Lee Tompkins (1936-2006). Her colorful, ingeniously improvisatory work is widely accessible and effortlessly evades any label that might occur: craft, outsider, abstraction, Pop. The 60 pieces in this show (which has not yet reopened, but will) were part of the museum's 2018 Eli Leon Bequest, a 400-artist, 3,000-quilt cache of African-American quilts that if handled properly — a building of its own might be in order — could become one of the university's defining attractions.

### 3. 'Jonathan Berger at Participant Inc.'

One of the best exhibitions yet mounted by this venerable alternative space was Jonathan Berger's installation "An Introduction to Nameless Love," which opened in March and reopened again in September. It filled the space with shimmering texts of cut metal that delved into unusual relationships, including that of the turtle conservationist Richard Ogust and the diamondback terrapin that pointed him toward his calling. The floor beneath the letters was their exact opposite in terms of material: It was black, matte and slightly soft and made of thousands of small cubes of charcoal that expressed their own kind of tenderness.

### 4. 'Festival of Judd, New York'

Opening just weeks before the shutdown, the Museum of Modern Art's magisterial retrospective of Donald Judd's objects was so impeccably selected and installed, it seemed that even that famously exacting Minimalist would have approved. His sense of color, scale and materials has rarely been so clear. The retrospective inspired a cluster of Judd shows in galleries around town. Most notable was Gagosian's exhibition of one of Judd's largest, least-seen efforts, an untitled 1980 installation piece in unfinished plywood that had not been exhibited in New York since 1981. It presented a grid of horizontal compartments subdivided by inserted planes, most on the diagonal, that divided the piece into a series of rhythmically contrasting volumes, planes and edges. They implied some kind of musical instrument delivering an exultant blast of sound.



Agnes Pelton's 1929 painting "Star Gazer," an early example of the artist's mature style. Agnes Pelton, via Whitney Museum of American Art

## 5. 'Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist'

A chapter was added to the history of women's contributions to abstract painting with a small career survey of the painter Agnes Pelton (1881-1961), which came to the Whitney Museum of American Art from the Phoenix Art Museum. It was a beautiful show, full of inventive shapes levitating in tinted atmospheres with evening stars and spiraling lines; these canvases navigated their own fusion of geometric and organic forms and high art and popular art sources, especially Walt Disney's "Fantasia."

## 6. Online Viewing Rooms

As the art world closed down, online gallery exhibitions kicked in and “viewing rooms” became a thing. These were largely fancified versions of online access already common to gallery websites, except that you usually had to sign in and as a result perhaps feel slightly surveilled. Once there, images might slide seductively past, alternating with close-ups and whole views and pithy quotes from some writer or cultural figure. On the fancier sites, especially, it seemed like we were all in on the sales pitch. By the fall, it was clear that, with or without bells and whistles, viewing rooms and online exhibitions had become an art world staple, a way for galleries to expand their real estate, if only digitally. It is definitely not as good as the in-the-flesh experience, but it is another way to show, and see, more art.



View of “(Nothing but) Flowers” at Karma gallery. From left, Marley Freeman’s “Untitled,” 2020; two 2016 watercolors by Stephanie Crawford: “Flowers on Tablecloth,” top, and “Still Life with Lemons,” below; Andrew Cranston’s “The Gloaming,” 2020; Lois Dodd’s “Joe Pye Weed (Eutrochium),” 1995; five paintings by Tabboo! (2014 to 2018); far right, James Harrison’s “Walk in Wild Flowers,” 2020. Karma, New York

## 7. ‘(Nothing but) Flowers’ at Karma

It was just a gallery group show, but its size, inclusiveness, theme and timing made it special. It was the first show that I and probably others saw after four or five months of sheltering in place. Between the absence of the art galleries and my absence from the city, I had come to feel rather feral, unfamiliar to myself. The vibrancy of this late-summer show snapped me back. It was a breath of fresh air, a sign of real life emphasized by the floral motifs. The more than 60 artists were an intergenerational, stylistically diverse group, but they all confirmed, as with one voice, the persistence of art and the instincts to make it.

## 8. ‘Jacolby Satterwhite’ at Mitchell-Innes & Nash

The multimedia artist Jacolby Satterwhite’s magnificent first show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in October was an engulfing sci-fi pastoral that included a large digital video projection densely populated with sexy androgynous avatars and other groups of creatures and humans performing Mr. Satterwhite’s angular choreography, smashing disco-ball meteorites or just standing around looking cool. The show also included sculptures and neon-light wall pieces that riffed on Caravaggio, Manet and maybe Bruce Nauman with Black protagonists. Visitors could sit on a thronelike rattan chair reminiscent of Huey Newton’s and experience the video in virtual reality. The pulsing techno music was built on four songs by the artist’s mother, who could also be heard singing them. One provided the show’s title — “We Are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other.” The idea that inflicting pain on others only deepens one’s own could not be more germane.





Paintings from Gerhard Richter's "October 18, 1977" series at the Museum of Modern Art. The full series, comprising 15 works, received its own gallery as a part of the museum's recent rehang. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

## 9. MoMA Restarts

Until it happened once, it was hard to understand what it meant — the Museum of Modern Art's big plan to rotate a third of its permanent collection every six months. The first rotation was supposed to open in May as the Spring Reveal. Ultimately, it became the Fall Reveal and opened in November. It was exhilarating to finally grasp how profound it will be to have MoMA's collection trade its chiseled-in-stone fixedness for permanent, in-progress fluidity. Everyone — curators, visitors, scholars and artists — will have a new relationship with the museum, its vast holdings and the histories they can tell. The mind boggles.

## 10. Gone but Not Forgotten

Luther Price, Ron Gorchov, Siah Armajani, Paul Kasmin, Germano Celant, Maurice Berger, Zarina Hashmi, Ian Wilson, Beverly Pepper, John Baldessari, Jack Youngerman, Kevin Consey, Virginia Wright, Suellen Rocca, David C. Driskell, Thomas Sokolowski, Tina Girouard, Keith Sonnier, Rafael Leonardo Black, Renato Danese, Jason Polan, James Brown and Alexandra Condon, Mark Prent, Joanna Frueh, Genesis P-Orridge and Emma Amos.

---

JASON FARAGO

## Pictures From a Crisis

The only virtue of this washed-out year: When the circus stopped, the art world could no longer lie to itself. For years, boosters told us that shows were "essential," fairs "unmissable"; we discovered we could do without them quite well. And institutions reputed as "progressive" had to admit their intransigence. If 2021 is to be a year of reassessment and reconstruction, let's at least promise to do it seriously.



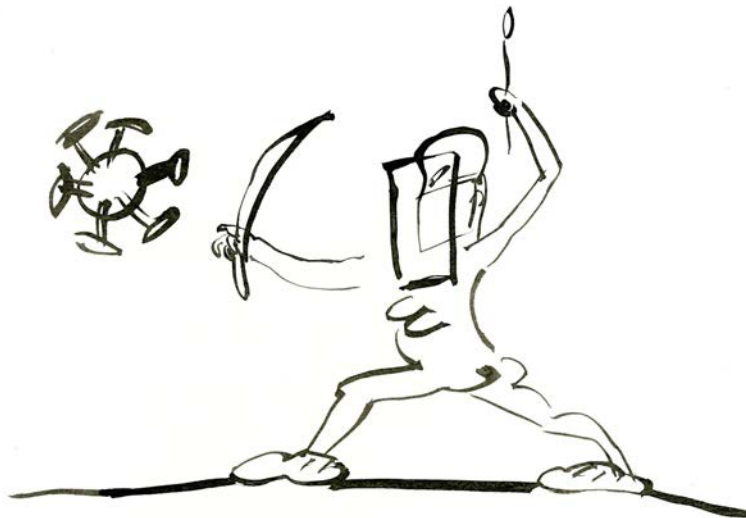
The Detroit D.J. Carl Craig converted the basement of Dia Beacon into an austere and haunting nightclub for his exhibition “Party/After Party.” Victor Llorente for The New York Times

## 1. ‘Carl Craig: Party/After Party’

The year’s most intelligent and most despondent exhibition came not from an artist, but a musician: the Detroit D.J. Carl Craig, whose conversion of Dia Beacon’s basement into a vacant nightclub pipes techno into a bloodline of minimal and industrial art stretching from Dan Flavin and Philip Glass back to the Bauhaus. With its bright, liquid beats, through its chest-jouncing bass line, “Party/After Party” crescendoes into a staggering amalgamation of popular revelry and high art, and a vindication of Black electronic music’s inheritances and influence. And then every nightclub on Earth closed — instantly converting Mr. Craig’s installation, five years in the making, into a memorial for when pleasure was still possible and bodies could still touch. This show was a feat from day one; Covid-19 made it an adventitious masterpiece, a taxidermied stage for all we have lost. (*Through summer 2021.*)

## 2. Gerhard Richter + Ceija Stojka

Two profound shows with nothing in common except one question: Can you paint Auschwitz? *I cannot*, pleaded “Gerhard Richter: Painting After All,” the German artist’s icy summation, up for just nine days at the Met Breuer — whose culminating “Birkenau” series began with an effort to paint photographs of the extermination camp, and ended up as streaky, speechless abstractions. *I must*, cried “Ceija Stojka: This Has Happened,” the Roma survivor’s burning retrospective at Madrid’s Museo Reina Sofia — whose runny, unrestrained paintings of Auschwitz bore witness to a genocide still in danger of being forgotten.



A drawing of a virus-fighter by Camille Henrot, one of the artists who organized the emergency P.P.E. distribution network Mask Crusaders. Camille Henrot for Mask Crusaders

### 3. Mask Crusaders + Pictures for Elmhurst

Mid-March, desperate days, and Camille Henrot suddenly realizes: her studio is sitting on a stockpile of masks, gloves and respirators used for work with hazardous materials. The network that she, Shabd Simon-Alexander and their fellow Mask Crusaders built quickly channeled 150,000 items of P.P.E. from artists and museums to frontline workers. Soon after came Pictures for Elmhurst, an online fundraiser of print-on-demand photography by Rineke Dijkstra, Thomas Demand and 185 other artists, which raised \$1.38 million for New York's hardest-hit hospital. Both reaffirmed that artists *already* have the capability to build new systems, and can get things moving in a matter of days.

### 4. Liu Xiaodong + Amy Sillman

Two artists, of quite different styles but sharing a rare benevolence, recommitted themselves during the lockdown to the daily practice of painting. Mr. Liu, a Chinese painter stuck in New York when flights stopped, showed at Lisson Gallery his sympathetic watercolors of isolated pedestrians and trees flowering in empty parks, many painted en plein air (with mask on). Ms. Sillman, a virtuoso of motion, brought to Gladstone Gallery not only commanding new abstractions but a pandemic surprise: small, tender floral still lifes, ardent promises of new life.



Early painted wood works in the exhibition "Judd," at the Museum of Modern Art. Donald Judd Art; Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Zack DeZon for The New York Times

### 5. 'Judd'

His specific objects are, as the curator Ann Temkin said during a lockdown talk, "the original self-distancers." MoMA's note-perfect retrospective, when it opened in March, let us encounter all Judd's art with no barriers between our bodies and his boxes. When I revisited in autumn, and clocked how each minimal sculpture directed my movements around it, I discovered how thoroughly Judd had prefigured our pandemic dances. (*Through Jan. 9.*)

### 6. Van Eyck

Art criticism is carbon-intensive; I'd planned this year to burn an appalling amount of jet fuel to visit Raphael in Rome, Matisse in Paris, Artemisia Gentileschi in London. I saw none of them — but in February I got to the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium, for "Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution." For this one time only, eight panels of his altarpiece came out of Ghent's cathedral and were shown as individual paintings. They are so beautiful, so stupefyingly perfect, they feel almost sacrilegious.



Philip Guston's "Blackboard" (1969). The artist's inclusion of Ku Klux Klan imagery caused a backlash in the art world, resulting in a decision by four museums to postpone a major retrospective of his work. The Estate of Philip Guston and Hauser & Wirth

## 7. The Guston Letter

This summer's oceanic antiracism protests have had many good repercussions for our museums, and one gross one: performative white guilt as PR strategy. *Get real*, said hundreds of American artists, who countered the pathetic, condescending four-year postponement of "Philip Guston Now" with a ringing public call for true accountability. The four museums organizing the show told us that Guston's later paintings, with men in hoods reminiscent of Ku Klux Klan members, risked being "misinterpreted" today. What the artists maintained is that you can't face up to white supremacy through withdrawal; you have to think hard, read deeply, reach out, get to work.

## 8. The Deaccessioning Debacle

The pandemic's puncturing of nonprofit budgets led the Association of Art Museum Directors this year to relax guidelines on liquidating their collections — and institutions from Syracuse to Palm Springs and Baltimore to Brooklyn decided to flog their family jewels. On deaccessioning, I'm not a strict constructionist. Selling art that hasn't been shown for decades can sometimes be justified. But strategically raiding your galleries for cash is a scandal; equity and preservation are not at odds; and woke austerity is still austerity.



Anthony van Dyck's "Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-Stricken of Palermo," which the artist painted while quarantined in Sicily in 1624. It is on view in "Making the Met" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

## 9. 'Making the Met'

The capstone of the Met's bust of a 150th birthday, this rich self-scrutiny reordered the prizes of the museum by date of acquisition, rather than creation, to map the growth of a collection widening from Eurocentricity into a real universalism. The most urgent painting here is one of the Met's very first purchases: Anthony van Dyck's "Saint Rosalia," vanquisher of a 17th-century epidemic, whom I've adopted as my Covid protectress. (*Through Jan. 3.*)

## 10. The Cows at the Clark



Analia Saban's "Teaching a Cow How to Draw," at the Clark Art Institute, is a wooden fence whose rails mimic introductory art lessons: the rule of thirds, one-point perspective, or the golden ratio. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

When art left me, when it all buckled, the bovines of the Berkshires steered me right. The Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., kept its grounds open through the pandemic's bewildering first months, and there I'd watch a dozen cows munch and mosey across the museum fields — a Constable tribute act, taking it one day at a time. In summer, the Argentine artist Analia Saban erected "Teaching a Cow How to Draw," a fence whose rails illustrate principles of drawing for the animals; they seem to like it.

---

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2009.

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. @robertasmithnyt

Jason Farago is an art critic. He reviews exhibitions in New York and abroad, with a focus on global approaches to art history. Previously he edited *Even*, an art magazine he co-founded. In 2017 he was awarded the inaugural Rabkin Prize for art criticism. @jsf