

Three art advisers talk about how the pandemic has affected their approach and what it's like to deal in a digital world. By Jesse Bratter

COLLECTING DURING COVID



PHOTO BY PETER KOLOFF



Jaume Plensa, *Awilda and Irma*, 2014, private residence, Miami Beach. Opposite page: Maria Brito at home.

Corporate attorney-turned-art adviser Maria Brito (mariabrito.com)—CEO of her eponymous firm—has spent the past 13 years placing hundreds upon hundreds of contemporary works by the likes of Nina Chanel Abney, Anish Kapoor and Kehinde Wiley into her clients’ collections. In that time, the New York City-based art aficionado has seen appetites grow hungrier for emerging artists, figurative painters and black artists. Waitlists for works by creatives who graduated a mere two months ago. Astronomical prices at auction for artists with virtually no career. All due to the influence of Instagram, which has allowed artists, dealers and collectors to engage and

view each other’s work in unprecedented ways.

Lisa Austin—principal of Lisa Austin & Associates (laanda.net) in Miami Beach and New Jersey—has been in the art game for 42 years. From Gerhard Richter to Julie Mehretu to Pablo Picasso, she focuses on contemporary art in all its forms, whether blue chip or just out of art school. Since her start as an administrative assistant for the fine arts department at a bank (a “temporary” dip into the artworld, she thought), she’s seen the industry morph as well—mainly in terms of money. Giant sums, she says, pouring in, informing the way pieces are priced and creating overnight superstars.

Then there’s Alex Glauber, founder and principal

of AWG Art Advisory (awgartadvisory.com) and adjunct faculty member at the Sotheby’s Institute of Art in New York, where he teaches about the art market and collection building and management. Even more so than helping his clients buy art, he helps them learn what to say no to. It’s a tough task since the changing landscape he’s noticed most over his career includes not only the larger scale and wider breadth of options available, but also the light speeds at which information can be shared and the velocity at which an emerging artist can go from having no representation to having a sold-out show to having works at auction.

And then in 2020, another transformation: ►

The entire world came to a complete standstill, and with it, every art fair, exhibition and gallery showing. So what were art advisers like Brito, Austin and Glauber to do? Each of them weighs in below on how the pandemic has affected their approach, how they're navigating the new normal, and how to reconcile the realities of experiencing three-dimensional art on a computer or even smartphone screen.

JESSE BRATTER: How are you currently collaborating with your clients on new acquisitions?

MARIA BRITO: Seventy-five percent of all my sales happen online, with images and PDFs shared on WhatsApp, text and even DM on Instagram. And not just small purchases, but seven-figure acquisitions as well. I'm lucky that the majority of my clients live in New York and some of them are still very excited to explore galleries in person and art fairs too. Many of them came with me in person to Frieze in May and The Armory Show in September. My clients outside of New York get tons of regular offerings and updates by email and text.

LISA AUSTIN: Early in the pandemic, everything went quiet as we all began processing what was going on—it was a giant shock to the system, and I truly thought it would last about 90 days and then we would all get back to normal. Now in year two, we've changed our habits—I am still doing more virtually than in person. But there is real pent-up demand to see art in person and I am sensing that collectors are anxious to return to the IRL world of collecting.

ALEX GLAUBER: While business and the way in which I engage clients is by no means back to 'normal,' it is certainly easier than it was a year ago. For my clients based in New York, I'm able to see them with greater regularity and get out to see gallery shows and review potential acquisitions in person. However, there are still a number of clients who have either decamped from New York to second homes or are overseas whom I haven't seen in person since before the pandemic.

While there is never a substitute for seeing and experiencing a work of art in person, we have all become more digitally nimble and creative in how we communicate the significance of a particular artist or artwork. Aside from requesting additional images and videos of an object from a gallery or dealer, I've taken to using Zoom and sharing my screen so that I'm able to talk clients through previews or images of specific objects.

JB: Walk us through the ways the pandemic has changed sourcing.

MB: It has gotten better! At the beginning of the pandemic, I was offered several important works



Lisa Austin, standing in front of Ramin Barthin, *Recontextualised Architectural Spaces VII*, 2018

“I AM IMMEDIATELY REMINDED THAT YOU CAN'T TRULY KNOW HOW TO EVALUATE ART UNLESS YOU CAN SEE IT IN PERSON.” -LISA AUSTIN

by collectors who were rethinking their strategy and wanted to sell things. Also, since everything went to digital and was already selling that way, not that much changed. What it changed, obviously, was the amazing experience of seeing art in person, which is unparalleled.

LA: In the past, for me the virtual world was for research. Now it reaches all the way into closing the sale. But I am uncomfortable unless I have seen the work in person or I know the artist's work well enough to endorse it.

AG: I think across the board and beyond the

artworld, COVID has forced us to shift quite dramatically from a global perspective to a local one. We're not able to be peripatetic like we used to be, running from one international art fair or gallery opening to the next. I think the novelty of OVRs wore off pretty early on due to the volume of them and uneven functionality. So, the answer for many collectors and advisers was to focus on their local community of galleries and artists.

JB: How are you navigating working with artists or galleries?

MB: Most people I'm dealing with have been ▶



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Martine Gutierrez, four photographs from the 'Indigenous Woman' series, 2018. Over sofa: Diana al-Hadid, *Untitled drawing*, 2014, private residence, New York City.

fully vaccinated and make a point of letting me know. Everyone is cautious and respectful, but at the same time, life goes on and New York galleries and artists have been ready to welcome people since the spring. It's also a very strict state and the rules are complied with all the time: masks and now certificates of vaccinations are required everywhere.

LA: I have always worked with a deep breadth of galleries, and I rely on them to keep me updated and work with me to come up with the right solutions for a client. Those relationships are more

important than ever right now.

I just started going back to galleries in person, and to art fairs. It's like the first day of school—we are all so happy to see one another. I am immediately reminded that you can't truly know how to evaluate art unless you can see it in person. It also helps immensely to have a conversation about the work with a knowledgeable dealer.

AG: I've been attending shows and viewings in person as much as I can and even made it to Europe twice over the summer for specific client projects, which, while successful, were by no means easy or

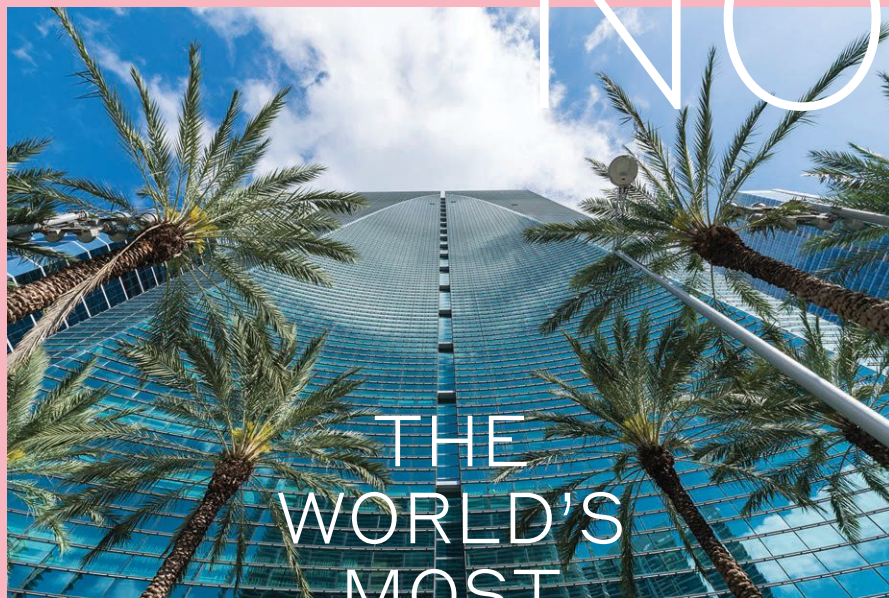
seamless due to quarantines and other restrictions.

JB: There's been an evolution of viewing artwork virtually. Can you address how this affects the experience for the audience?

MB: There are some interesting ways to engage online and it attracts more people because it's so much easier to sit in front of a computer than to go from place to place. But it's also unsatisfactory since we can't see details. Some photographs aren't that great, and scale isn't conveyed properly.

LA: It's good and bad. It allows you to see a ton of work from your device without pounding the ▶

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From left: Sarah Lucas, *Vox Pop Doris*, 2018, private residence, Sagaponack, New York; Alex Glauber, founder and principal, AWG Art Advisory.

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—ALEX GLAUBER

pavement all over the world. But it’s bad because everything looks the same: brightly lit, flattened and the same scale. It also makes art viewing kind of boring—after a while, you’re just blasting through image after image and nothing sticks.

AG: I think viewing art virtually affects the experience a good deal and has influenced the kind of art we’ve seen and the types of art that are commercially successful in this environment. We are inundated with so many images that our attention spans and patience for nuance, either visual or conceptual, have become increasingly limited.

While this was exacerbated by the pandemic, I think it finds its roots in how Instagram became an important means of discovering and reifying emerging artists over the last decade. Sculpture and installation are the most obvious casualties of this viewing format. However, if you dig a bit deeper, it would make sense that graphic, colorful and punchy images would leave a more lasting impact when viewed digitally than Minimalist masterpieces, for instance. Additionally, as images circulate freely across a global arts audience, artists who work with an easily recognizable and consistent visual language are naturally going to garner a more immediate audience.

I think this is unfortunate if for no other reason that if an artist can be successfully summed up with just a few images of their work, I’m not sure how much depth there is to the practice. Some of my favorite artists and artworks are slow in that they only reveal their magic and mystery over time. Great artists evolve and reinvent themselves, which often feels at odds with how the art market and online audiences currently anoint artists.

JB: With the onslaught of digital engagement, ►



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