



Reena Makes Lists

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Can The Art World Grieve?

We get to be sad. Even Taylor Swift says so.



Reena Devi

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You're reading Reena Makes Lists, a weekly newsletter by [arts journalist Reena Devi](#). This post will go out every Thursday, unless said writer is swamped with commissioned assignments or life in general. If you like this, subscribe [here](#).

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Maybe we need the bold emotionality of Taylor Swift scream singing: [I GET SAD!](#)

A collective sense of loss is increasingly evident but is there space for it in the art world? (The [Felix Gonzalez-Torres Project](#) does not count. At all.)

- As I write these words, the world stands closer to the veil of death than it has in recent decades, with approximately 2.5 million lives lost from the pandemic.
- Even with the increasingly verified hope offered by vaccines, we may not necessarily know how to process this level of loss and grief.
- Society in general “privileges novelty and graphic shock value over (a) relentless, slow-moving catastrophe that we can’t easily see firsthand.” Also, people are prone to “psychic numbing”, where “the more who die, the less we care.”
- Inevitably, there is a growing number of public memorial works. Last August, the Italian town of Casalpuusterlengo unveiled a memorial designed by Ottorino Buttarelli, a local artist, featuring stones piled into a small tower, representing townspeople who passed away.



Screenshot of New York Times article.

- Less conventional approaches include British artist Jeremy Deller creating a print of a huge, golden statue of a pangolin, with sale proceeds going towards supporting British museums struggling during the pandemic.
- There is also grief for the way of life we all lost to the pandemic, varied it may be across different communities, countries and social strata. Yet, most of us dare not even admit, beyond the superficial notion of self-care, that the world has simply become too much. We dare not even process this emotionally as individuals.
- So it is imperative that this sense of loss and change is explored in our art and discourse in a myriad of pervasive ways. After all, Covid-19 (and its ensuing effects) is only the

beginning in an an era of historical and personal transmutation.

Curious: Theaster Gates



Screenshot of Sotheby's website.

- One of the few authentic attempts of late to create space for grief in the art world was the panel discussion on New Museum exhibition “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” exploring the emotional response to racism and violence experienced by Black communities in the US.
- The discussion also paid tribute to the late curator Okwui Enwezor, who originally conceived the show. Gates, who was on the panel, offered some of the more emotional insights:

...where he (Enwezor) would just say go further, you're not going far enough, it is evident there is more in there...it felt like a loving hand or a big brother or someone whom you deeply believe in, who has knowledge of the field, telling you that the field doesn't know you and won't know you till you show up...he was making space for us so that we could show up and be our whole selves.

- Announced this week, Gates is also on the advisory panel of an upcoming exhibition at The Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, reflecting on the death of Breonna Taylor. She was shot by police in her own home in the same city a year ago next month.
- Gates, who is known as “Chicago's star of social practice art,” may have his issues, such as being “slightly too practiced at drawing high-wattage illumination to his varied projects.” However, he also provided the only inspired moment on HBO's documentary about Black visual artists:

Until we own the light, I'm not happy. Until we are in our own houses of exhibition, discovery, and research, until we've figured out how to be masters of the world, then I'd rather work in darkness.

Articles worth reading for their prescience in describing contemporary issues and developments beyond the insularity of the art world:

- We are in the future. That much is obvious in [this look back on Alvin Toffler's Future Shock](#), published 50 years ago. Also talks about the blindspots in futurism.
- I mentioned this in [my last newsletter](#) but [Boredom Economy](#) really examines how the tedium of our current lives (mostly due to the pandemic) is influencing productivity and consumer habits.
- I'm a little late to the party but [anything on or by Fran Lebowitz](#) should be on everybody's list. This choice quote of hers seems even more prescient, given [the strident and incessant tone](#) art market news has been hitting lately:



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Fran Lebowitz: "If you go to auction, out comes a Picasso, there's dead silence. Once the hammer comes down on the price, there's an applause. And we live in this world where we applaud the price and not the Picasso."

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