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JILL CONNER
Art critic, Curator, and Founder of AS | Artists Studios

Jill Conner is an art critic, curator and the founder of AS | Artists Studios (AS). AS is an online archive of underrepresented artists from the US and Paris vis-à-vis New York City. Conner is also an editor and mentor for On-Verge, a curator at Wondereur, and a board member of AICA-USA, the American chapter of the International Association of Art Critics. As a member of the Artists Equity community, Jill has also written a critical essay for a chapter in Meghan Keane’s monograph, *Displacement, Desplazamiento*.



How did being an art critic play into becoming a curator?

For me, curating eventually took the place of art reviewing, because I felt that the best art I was seeing had mostly been in the studios of artists who had no gallery representation. The problem with magazines is that they are not able to let writers discover artists who do not have either a gallery, an exhibition, or group show.

Over time, I had been visiting a lot of studios and saw a lot of art that I thought could easily be exhibited in a gallery, but had not yet gone through the politics in order to get there. So, I decided to stop reviewing and start an online archive about underrepresented art and focus on and promote artists, in a very unbiased way, whose work deserved to be reviewed.

What role does a community have in supporting artists and connecting curators to artists?

In post-war New York, American art critics began to champion a handful of artists and bring them to recognition. But I believe that since then, the community’s obligations have changed -- the art world shouldn’t really just go by what’s covered in the magazines but, instead, we should visit as many galleries as possible. Viewers should feel comfortable with looking at art that is beyond what is outlined in magazines, and more based on what they identify with personally.

That is exactly is what I find to be lacking - the lack of individual solid viewpoints. Antoine de Galbert, who founded the Maison Rouge in Paris, for instance, acquires art based upon a personal conviction and personal identity, venturing throughout the price scale.



Image courtesy of Gisella Sorrentino and AS | Artists Studios

What type of art are you interested in representing and shedding light on as an independent curator?

I feel that a lot of good art isn’t necessarily hanging in galleries. I still wonder if that means more interesting art is being made in the studio - much like a ripe idea that might not be as ready for exhibition, but still worth viewing.

I like work that is provocative and pushes the envelope. Sometimes I think viewers, like myself, tend to grow comfortable in galleries and lose sense of more dynamic genres or styles. The art that I see in artists’ studios is also comfortable in terms of the colors or contours chosen, but the representations and use of materials are provocative. The work and/or the artist might not be well known, or on the low end of the price range, but it feels more visually diverse and

challenging.

Because underrepresented artists are still a little bit beyond the mainstream, they never become comfortable in their work. There is virtue in that, even though it’s not easily felt by the artist. A few years ago there was a desire among art critics to see more work that looked as if it had been made by hand. Of course there have been volumes of tangible, authentic art works out there, but most of it remained anonymous beyond the rapid growth of the art market.

What I find most interesting about underrepresented artists is that they go into their studios regularly and create amazing work that might never be seen. They do this because they feel it is important, which is an incredibly remarkable phenomenon.

It seems like you started AS | Artists Studios to wrestle with the problem of great artists who aren’t represented by a gallery. Have any artists become represented thereafter, or gotten commissions through AS | Artists Studio? Do you think it’s still important for an artist to get gallery representation?

Yes, I started AS | Artists Studios as a free, selective resource for collectors, dealers and curators. I have wanted to create a space that can bring about the right relationships. For instance, artists should be able to sell out of their studio. And yet galleries should still be credited for anchoring the trajectory of patronage.

Due to that, I think it is important for artists to ultimately have gallery representation, because it points an artist’s work towards the canon of art history, underscoring the relevance of their careers. Heidi Howard was recently signed to the roster of the Nancy Margolis Gallery, and about a year ago, photographer Marianna Rothen was signed by Steven Kasher Gallery. Prior to that, Nick Lamia joined the Jason McCoy Gallery. When I inquired if the AS profiles of each of those artists should be removed, the answer was positive: to maintain their profile as a record in the scope of AS | Artists Studios.

How do you balance being in charge of AS | Artists Studios with being an independent curator?

AS | Artists Studios is a curated site, so it does work hand-in-hand with being an independent curator. I’m currently developing a new angle that will reach out to artists who live and work beyond the East Coast.

The primary reason why I developed an archive was out of a desire to see an era of contemporary art become more sustainable over time through new archival sources made possible by the internet. Without that no one would be able to remember many of these artists if nothing tangible is left over. Many artists have already been misplaced due to time, and upon noticing this cycle I wanted to figure out a way to create an index that would serve as a more permanent resource.

For example, if an art or art history student would someday like to pursue research regarding light sculpture, they would consult the Art Index at any Art Library and find either Dan Flavin or James Turrell under those terms. But they might not see James Clark, an artist who also does light sculpture but isn’t known beyond his studio because he doesn’t have gallery representation - even though he has exhibited frequently throughout his career. AS | Artists Studios is meant to be a source of reference that parallels the Art Index, without the ISBN reference.



What advice do you have for a curator who is just starting out?

Curators need to hold tightly to their vision for a show or idea.

What is a tip you can give to an artist applying to residencies?

Be as prolific as possible. Learn how to articulate yourself clearly on paper as well. Whether or not an artist receives grants, one should be able to look at his or her projects from a literal perspective.

Why do you believe it’s important for artists to know/understand/appreciate art history?

I received a double degree in Germanics and Art History from the University of Washington in Seattle, and I read this really great book titled *The Civilizing Process* (1937) by Norbert Elias, a German scholar who identified works of art in the scope of culture as “human products,” that are there like “flowers of the field.” Art was considered the means through which the individuality of a people expresses itself. As a result, art informs an individual of their identity as well as that of society. After WWII, the goal of establishing both a societal and individual identity was lost and replaced by the art market.

Norbert Elias identified the role of the critic as one who helps the artist and the general public find each other. I think it’s easier to do now because of the internet. Before we had strong non-profit gallery programs, and publishing sources, but the outreach was still limited. Now that is being replaced by internet, which brings up the other issue of how to filter through volumes of information to find good quality artists. So I guess that’s another point to be aware of - how to keep the database of AS | Artists Studios top quality, so that it doesn’t compete with the internet.

Interviewed by Sarah Cho

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