

## Artists facing historical events: Initial perspectives on art in COVID-19 times

Los artistas frente a los acontecimientos históricos: perspectivas iniciales sobre el arte en tiempos de la COVID-19

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Abstract: Worldwide, the sudden appearance of COVID-19 has changed the social structures and lifestyles we used to have. In this context, a panoramic review of other historical events is presented, which in addition to signifying a turning point for humanity, has also given rise to new approaches, styles, and movements that have revolutionized the artistic work. This article analyzes some of the early plastic and visual artworks created with the current pandemic theme to contribute to the reflection on the artist's role in the face of COVID-19.

**Keywords:** Pandemic art, art, COVID-19, art history

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Resumen: La súbita aparición de la COVID-19 ha cambiado a nivel mundial las estructuras sociales y los modos de vida a los que estábamos acostumbrados. En este contexto, se presenta una revisión panorámica de otros acontecimientos históricos, que además de significar un vuelco para la humanidad también generaron nuevas propuestas, tendencias y movimientos que revolucionaron el quehacer artístico. Se analizan algunas obras de arte plásticas y visuales desarrolladas con el tema de la pandemia actual a fin de aportar a la reflexión sobre el papel del artista frente a la COVID-19.

**Palabras clave:** Arte en pandemia, arte, COVID-19, historia del arte

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A brief review of art history, from its beginnings with prehistoric paintings to the famous piece *Comedian* (2019) by Maurizio Cattelan, indicates that we are in front of a cultural manifestation of dynamic character. It could not be otherwise if we assume that art is an activity that follows the rhythm of social events that are transforming the world.

With this premise, we can only conceive and accept that the only time the cave paintings in the Lascaux caves could have been formed and conceptuated was 18,000 years ago in the wild Palaeolithic. Likewise, a work like Leonardo *Da Vinci's Gioconda* executed with exact scientific criteria of light, color, and perspective fits perfectly with Renaissance Florence where "the ideal of the *uomo universale* supported by a total education to form a com-

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plete man; a universal knowledge” (Montes de Oca, 2010, p. 21) was initiated. And to give a more striking example, *Fountain* presented by Marcel Duchamp in 1917 resulted from the rejection and criticism of an era in which, as Cabanne (2013) indicates, artists had become elevated and distanced from their work, leaving it relegated to the background.

Furthermore, to approach a work of art, it is crucial not only to contextualize it broadly within its own space and time but also to understand how its elements, materials, concepts, consumers, agents of dissemination and legitimation have been affected by its historical moment. From a sociological perspective, it was defined that:

The diverse manifestations of art go hand in hand with thought, social customs, ethic, philosophy, moral, cultural standards, etc. The need for expression and communication of man is given by his environment, showing his position and personal vision of the vices, defects, and shortcomings of the systems that frame their collective universe, appealing to the conscience of the spectator towards an awakening of sensitivity. In other words, there is no “pure” art free of intentions (Arias, Riquelme and Cañavir, 2012, p. 6).

Given the above premises, the questions arise: Will the COVID-19 virus be the starting point of a new era? How will artists respond to this context that has arrived so suddenly in every corner of the planet? More than a year after the pandemic began, it is clear that it has meant a 180-degree turn in social, economic, cultural, health, and environmental structures. Although many are still reluctant to believe it, social researchers have already pointed out that it “could then be the beginning of another stage for the whole civilization, as it happened at the time of the Renaissance, obscurantism or the Enlightenment, with new distributions of power spaces and their consequent rearrangements between national, regional and global actors” (Arbeláez-Campillo and Villasmil, 2020, p. 504).

It is easy to deduce, in specific terms of the plastic and visual arts, that these practices have begun to manifest alterations, both in the production and execution of the work itself, as well as in its distribution, management, consumption, and even artistic pedagogy. Therefore, it is a fact that “art, despite the circumstances, sufferings and events that arise, will never cease to manifest itself and continue to demonstrate every moment or situation that human beings suffer in their environment” (Añazco and Peña, 2020, p. 3).

However, the new epochs were not always well received. If there is a common thread that characterizes societies of all times and spaces, it is that the social groups that accept change are equal in number to the groups that reject it. In recent months, much has been written about the “new order,” and although this term has been used extensively in science fiction films, the truth is that it is a concept that defines the modifications that have characterized the passage from one historical era to another. To take one example, the industrial revolution during the 17th century was one of the major turning points in world history. It was greeted with great enthusiasm by some and distrust by others.

The artistic forms and expressions that emerged as a response to significant historical events have not been immune to criticism and rejection either. The spread of humanist ideas and rational thought that characterized the beginning of the Renaissance to the detriment of medieval feudal ideas brought about the execution of works of art based on rigorous studies of anatomy that even contributed to important medical advances. The

most famous case was that of Leonardo Da Vinci, artist and initiator of modern scientific enlightenment:

He quickly became a master in topographical anatomy, carrying out numerous studies on muscles, tendons, and other visible anatomical features. It was then that his real interest in anatomy was awakened, which would allow him, already as a successful artist, to practice dissection in hospitals in Florence, Milan and Rome. He was convinced by the idea that artistic anatomy research could only improve on the dissection table (Garcia, 2013, p. 26).

And although this was assimilated as a contribution by some of Da Vinci's contemporary artists and doctors, it also received the rejection of conservative sectors that were suspicious about the conjunction of art and humanism. "His practical dissection studies were interrupted in 1515 when Pope Leo X accused him of sacrilegious practices, and he was forbidden to enter the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome" (Garcia, 2013, p. 26).

Likewise, the case of the nudes that Michelangelo Buonarroti painted in the Sistine Chapel is famous. These *frescos* were commissioned and well received by Pope Paul III. However, only two decades after their completion, they were censored by Pius V, being "the naked images of the Sistine Chapel ordered to cover their sexual parts with branches" (Ríos, 2016, p. 23).

The artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century received a similar wave of criticism. These responded to the emergence of new technologies and the rejection of industrialization. Social upheaval took hold of society and the revolutionary spirit was reflected in avant-garde art, which did not manifest itself as a single formal style but instead was expressed through various trends that, as a common axis, preferred abstract art to the detriment of figurativism. Perhaps one of the main detractors of avant-gardism was Ortega y Gasset, who pointed out that "if the new art is not intelligible to everyone, it means that its means are not generically human. It is not an art for men in general, but for a very particular class of men who may not be worth more than others, but who are evidently different" (1995, p. 319).

In the last century, avant-garde art took over the world. In Peru it developed since the 1930s and managed to impose itself over the art officially institutionalized: indigenism. The preference of many Peruvian artists for abstract art in all its variants unleashed euphoric debates published in Lima's leading newspapers, from which "two camps quickly formed: those who promoted non-figurative art and those who, on the contrary, rejected it outright" (Dancourt, 1998, p. 165). The arrival in Peru of the Italian artist Alberto Burri, an informalist painter who presented in a Lima gallery a painting that rejected formal premeditation and integrated unconventional materials into painting techniques, incited this controversy. A note in the newspaper *La Prensa* commented on this work:

The most discussed "painting" of all those that have been exhibited in Peru, is part of the exhibition of abstract painting that young Italians present in the Gallery of Lima, Jiron Ocoña. It costs four thousand soles and -in the opinion of the layman- "gives the impression of a blow to the head". Of course, this is not the opinion of some art critics, nor of some people who, in front of it, show signs of experiencing a finished aesthetic

pleasure. But these constitute a small minority. The “impression of the blow on the head” is evident in most of them, as reflected in frank and definite signs of indignation (1954, p. 8).

At present, the COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed a sort of “new order,” which has not appeared abruptly but has been preceded by environmental problems and the exhaustion of the socio-political and economic models that had been cracking in recent decades. In this regard, Arbeláez and Villasmil comment:

In this scenario, humanity would enter an uncertain world in which all the symbolic and material certainties built or imposed on the different societies as a guarantee of governance and governability would be outdated and would therefore have to be replaced at a variable but peremptory pace by new models, institutions, rituals and practices in the framework of another international architecture. Furthermore, we do not know under what epistemological, legal or contractual referents it would be configured (2020, p. 504).

Surely, the global art scene has been one of the most impacted by the virus. To be more specific: “As of April 22nd, 2020, 95% of the world’s countries had totally or partially closed their museums to the public, and 128 countries had completely closed all their cultural institutions” (UCLG, 2020, p. 13). Thousands of projects were left stranded in uncertainty, and currently art schools have not yet been able to restart their face-to-face programs. Besides that, although there are spaces for artistic dissemination that have already resumed their activities, fear, distance, and established protocols have led to a considerable decrease in the number of audiences. Contemporary artists have quickly assimilated this problem. They have turned to the streets and social networks to disseminate their works (Figures 1 and 2), especially representations around a figurative plastic associated with three figures: masks, toilet paper and the microscopic image of the coronavirus. On one hand, Banksy, a British urban artist, successfully published on his social network a small-format charcoal drawing representing a child playing with a nurse doll wearing a mask. (Fig.1) (Fig.2)

Replicating that path, hundreds of artists have followed in his footsteps and have taken an aesthetic close to pop art that has generated millions of *likes* on their publications. On the other hand, in Spain, a different fate befell sculptor Víctor Ochoa, who has received harsh criticism from the public and the press for “Reciclaje” (Recycling), a sculptural piece donated by the artist to the government of Madrid as a tribute to the victims of COVID-19. The work, made of bronze and polyester resin with a white enamel finish, represents the figure of a human being wearing a mask and standing on one leg. Critics have been recalcitrant and have pointed out:

The work donated by Ochoa has divided people, and not only because of its aesthetics, which has been a source of mockery and ridicule on social networks. The fact is that Victor Ochoa had already uploaded to his social networks three years ago formally identical images of the sculpture (but with a different finish), which would indicate

that this piece was not intended to be exposed on the occasion of a global pandemic. (El Español, 2020).

Many have coincided in indicating that in this piece no qualities stand out, neither in a formal sense, nor in a conceptual sense. So, the question arises: What qualities should a work of art have in order to reflect this new era?

As mentioned, the plastic and visual art of the pandemic worldwide has been reduced to working with images of masks, toilet paper and the representation of the coronavirus. It should be noted that this is not the first time that a disease has been used as the thematic content of a work of art. The ceramics of pre-Hispanic Peru had recorded the presence of eruptive diseases, even before the arrival of smallpox through the conquering Spaniards, as the Mochicas had already reproduced bodies with skin rashes. Likewise, evidence of deforming diseases has been found in pottery:

Many examples of pre-Columbian art show facial deformities compatible with various pathologies such as cleft lip, but some of them are considered representations of facial mutilations consistent with leishmaniasis. The Chimbote vessel preserved in the ethnographic museum of Berlin or the Trujillo vessel preserved in the ethnography museum of Geneva serve as examples (Seoane Prado, 2018, p. 293).

However, the most famous case is probably *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in the 16th century (Figure 3). If there is one thing that characterizes the history of the Middle Ages, it is its constant plagues - be they respiratory diseases, cholera or leprosy - which reduced up to 50% of the population. Brueghel depicted an epidemic that - comparable to the contemporary COVID-19 - did not distinguish sex, age, race, or class. In this case, the image of death is symbolized by the arrival of skeletons in a village that murder the villagers in various ways:

It is a moral work that shows the triumph of death over worldly things, symbolized through a great army of skeletons razing the earth. With their coffins as a shield, the scythe advances unstopably cutting throats, hanging people on pedestals and drowning them in the sea. In the background appears a barren landscape where scenes of destruction, shipwrecks, and fires still unfold. In the foreground, death at the head of its armies on a scrawny reddish horse destroys the world of the living, who are led to a colossal coffin, without hope of salvation, hunting them with skeleton dogs (Sánchez-Saldaña, 2020, p. 179). (Fig.3)

On the other hand, there was also no lack of reproductions of the recommended clothing to protect against epidemics. In 1656, Paul Fürst illustrated the elements made to prevent the plague of Marseilles (Figure 4), and a striking "mask in the shape of a bird's beak containing oils and fragrant herbs to counteract the stench of the sick" (Muñoz and Seoane Prado, 2016, p. 18). More contemporary, shocking, moving and realistic is the work of photographer Therese Frare, published in *Life magazine* in 1990. In the early 1980s the new human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) spread rapidly in the world and caused AIDS, a syndrome that deteriorates the immune system and causes death from various diseases. There was also a prejudice and rejection of society towards those infected. Frare made a series of black and white photographic portraits of activist David Kirby, surrounded by his family, in his moments of agony as a result of the syndrome. This work was an essential contribution to raising public awareness about AIDS and HIV, not only by putting the face of a suffering person and humanizing the problem, but also by the composition alluding to



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Figure 1. Daniel Capilla. *COVID-19 healthcare worker graffiti in Malaga, 2020*. (Taken from Wikimedia Commons)  
Figure 2. Marion Halft. *Memoria de los viejos tiempos (Memory of the old days), 2020*. (Taken from Wikimedia Commons)

the doctrine of *mercy*: “the suffering reflected in his consumed physiognomy, reminiscent of the iconography of the recumbent Christ, and the feeling of compassion and mercy conveyed by the photograph, contributed to changing society’s perception of the disease and the people suffering from it” (Sevilla Lizón, n. d.). (*Fig.4*)

The examples cited coincide in maintaining congruence between the form and content of the work of art. It is understood that, in any artistic manifestation, the material/visual elements and concepts must converge harmoniously, and this is what distinguishes the artistic object from other objects or creations. Bakhtin, quoted by Urueña (2014), indicates that artistic creation is only relevant if it is configured with a discourse capable of linking an “aesthetic object (content) and artistic form (matter)” (p. 6). The cases of Brueghel, Fürst, and Frare use a language in which tangible and intangible elements contribute to the quality of the work and position the artist as a producer of symbolic objects through the correct use of his faculties for the execution of material forms capable of transmitting messages with a high reflexive charge. In this sense, Tovar says :

For the work of art to be a closed and autonomous world, containing a form of knowledge, it is indispensable the artist who transmutes it into form, who makes it be, and for this it is not possible for him to remain in a relationship of knowledge with a receptive behavior, that behavior does not result in the work done; the artist must act to produce the work, he must engage in a relationship of action with the real material, with the substantial with which he brings the work to completion (2014, p. 42).

With this background, the current depictions of the COVID-19 pandemic could be placed in a style very close to pop art (*Fig. 5*).

Pop art was a movement that began in the mid-twentieth century and the images that characterize it, like all avant-garde movements, have a conceptual foundation, a background beyond the simple reproduction of figures seemingly out of a comic strip, that is, the technical reduction of forms had a sense of protest. This art was born in a convulsive scenario of vindictive social manifestations, contrary to other avant-gardes that had revolved around the middle and upper classes in the West, more specifically abstract expressionism, associated at the time with socialist rejection. Vindel comments:

The renewal of art became all the more pressing when, in a scenario violated by feminism, anti-racist demands, and the Vietnam War, it began to be vox populi that some of the American painting exhibitions at MOMA had been subsidized by the CIA, which preached the apoliticism of American abstract art as a strategy of resistance to the infiltration in that context of socialist realism from the Eastern Bloc, a suspicion that the article would confirm that Eva Cockcroft published under the title “Abstract Expressionism, Weapons and the Cold War” in June 1971 in the magazine *Artforum* (2008, 214).

In this context and motivated by the interest in the new technological media, the middle and upper classes became groups that tended to exaggerated consumerism. This habit came to move towards the lower sectors, then, “the trivial, the ephemeral, the banal, began to become the object of general interest” (Vindel, 2008, p. 94). Hence pop art, in terms of



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figure 3. Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *The Triumph of Death* (c. 1562). Prado Museum. (Taken from Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 4. Paulus Fürst. *Doctor Schnabel von Rom* (c. 1656). (Taken from Wikimedia Commons)



its formal aspect, and to exalt what they opposed, used figures associated with advertising media, cinema, television, and magazines, and eliminated the artist's own "hand" to show the depersonalization of the work. The use of basic colors, the elimination of perspective, and the precision of the lines facilitated the transmission of the superficial and vacuous message that had taken hold of contemporary art, which "abandons its traditional development and takes the path of representing a trivial present perceived consciously" (Bourlot, 2010, p. 94).

Today, several decades after the appearance of the first pop pieces in the world, the COVID-19 period has managed to reappropriate this trend and reuses it as a means to narrate some of the experiences that recent protocols and confinements have generated. However, contemporary pop art seems to have lost sight of its original critical sense. It has placed itself on the side of the impetus for acceptance within a digital market, which reproduces trendy images, regardless of whether or not they suggest any subject of reflection: "The approach of the works in this space is positivist in this sense, which may respond to the idea of the polished and the digitally beautiful" (Cantarero, 2021, p. 2206). However, we should not fail to mention that this sort of multiplication of art with "serial" images to the detriment of critical art is precisely a symptom of the pandemic and the problems that the world is carrying so far this century.

In this sense, the art produced since the appearance of the virus is seen as the reproduction of a past art, which is only distinguished by the figurative icons of the COVID-19 and, so far, without major novelties in its formal or thematic proposals, and does not generate a communicational impact on the viewer. It should also be added that both artists and the public have made a sort of displacement of their interest, from the unique work of art to serial design objects, which generates a circle, where "the artist tends to submit to the market through the communicative will of the work, the user, in an attitude of reciprocity, no longer has an attitude of veneration for the work as before" (Cruz Petit, 2012).

Walter Benjamin, in 1936, postulated that art should be capable of transcending the properties of the object itself and linking itself to the context where it is produced (1995). Given this premise, the following questions arise: Is the current relationship of human beings with the world based on a lack of concern for fundamental issues? Is this, perhaps, a defense mechanism to avoid assuming that the world is in crisis? In these last decades we have witnessed debates that proclaim a trivialization of 21st century art, both in formal terms, as well as in terms of content, which has led to the "concern to see that such a trend can lead to a superficial or cold art (more populist than popular or more theoretical than profound) that expresses an underlying decline" (Cruz Petit, 2012). The truth is that COVID-19 is still an ongoing reality, and the future will determine what concrete implications and changes in social structures will result from this key moment. In terms of art, there is still the expectation of whether or not a new stage will be generated that will radically transform the current art scene.

For the moment, a broad review of the Covid Art Museum , an online space that has compiled hundreds of works of art related to the pandemic, leads us to conclude that the visual narrative provoked by the virus is excluding the harshest reality that has been experienced around the world: hunger, death and poverty, and has positioned digital aesthetics to the detriment of the conceptual. However, as we are still immersed in a field under construction, it is worth bearing in mind that the proposed deductions are still partial. While

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Figure 5. Left: Thomas Baumgärtel. *Impf-Banane* (2021). Right: Hilda Chaulot. *Afectos en pandemia* (*Affections in pandemic*), 2020. (Both taken from Wikimedia Commons)

we wait for what posterity has in store for us, let us observe, analyze and debate what we experience.

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