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The Art Detective

'Great Art Advisors' Are a Pestilence on the Market. Luckily, They Are Starting to Melt Away, One by One

Why are these expensive consultants who materialize in boom times to make a quick buck? They appear out of the blue and often vanish into the ether.

Katya Kazakina February 1, 2021

A work from Jeff Koons's BIG Collection (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Artist)

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When Mondy Cronwell began advising people on buying art in 2002, she didn't want to be called a consultant because that word had a "bad connotation" back then. It was associated with "shady people."

Two decades on, Cronwell feels ambivalent about that title.

"Now I don't want to be called an art advisor because the market is so tainted by bad actors," she said this week.

We've all heard stories. When the market spits out a slew of cash, it attracts a pestilence of "great art advisors" who materialize out of thin air. They hold themselves out as experts, they claim to have "great access" to the best dealers, they rattle off lists of impressive sounding acronyms of advisors. They get kickbacks from the galleries in exchange for steering their clients to purchase the artists they represent. They are happy to the extent quietly without gushing about it—because they know people who know people who know the right people. They are the ones who, when the market turns, vanish into oblivion. In better decades, the folks against whom they prey—the collectors who hire them and pay them—call them the "so-called art advisors." Now, they're just "art advisors."

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Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #21, 1978, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy of Mondy Cronwell.

"A lot of people who pointed out business cards that said 'art advisor' during the last couple of years, when things got hot—collectors will disappear back into the woodwork never to be heard from again," Cronwell said. Her own clients, she said, have included some of the most famous collectors in the world, including Steve Cohen and Ken Griffin. "It's almost like a pandemic ecosystem that comes in and destroys everything. It's like a locust. They come in and they disappear as one, once the bubble deflates."

The bubble for some contemporary artists may be deflating a little now, as the pandemic has upended the art world and made people wary about "where to spend," which is one always would like a crisis, but good for a market in transition. The outsiders will have to wait for the dust to settle before they can resume their feeding frenzy. In the meantime, the market forces that have enabled them—Sotheby's, Christie's, Phillips, Gagosian, Pace, Hauser & Wirth, David Zwirner, Ernst Vegelin van Claasen—have rewarded their seven-figure clients with access to the best artists.

Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #21, 1978, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy of Mondy Cronwell.

"They are the shepard[sic]," Levin said. "They'll adopt any form that best turns their dance to hypnosis."

Some of the best-known artists are concocted by galleries. Small art advisors are usually absent from the black holes—because they are not known entities.

Cronwell, who is a lawyer and other current one this area—"and **Ernst Vegelin** van Claasen," she said—currently receives clients seeking "expertise and" from art advisors and a lesser hand or "they want to be connected to the right people." Cronwell said she has "called out of nowhere. Sometimes they do these blanket emails. They tend to be very mysterious about their collections and they want to be connected to the right people and have access to the best people." Cronwell said she has developed a "pretty extensive network" of people based on a shared transactional goal as much as shared necessity.

"I'm very transactional, I'm very—I don't have time for bullshit," she said. "I'm very direct. I'm very—I'm very—I'm very—

Firestone Gallery, New York.

She began exploring tattoos in earnest in 1962 with a series of "Tattoo Paintings." She painted tattoos on mannequin hands, arms, and legs as well as in her "Back Paintings" of 1972 to 1975. Several of these works are now on view at Eric Firestone Gallery.

Tattoos were not just a decorative trope, according to Jennifer Samet, who works closely with Edelheit and organized both of her shows at the gallery.

"The paintings become this arena in which she can depict not only their bodies, but their ideas and dreams," Samet said. "She used imagined tattoos as a way to tell those dreams."

Edelheit spent the past 30 years in Sweden, where she moved after her first husband died and she remarried. She met her second husband, Sam Nilsson, years earlier, after her brother's accident. A budding journalist, he would go on to become the head of Swedish public broadcasting and a prominent figure in the media and culture circles. Edelheit unexpectedly found herself in a new role, attending Nobel Prize galas and having dinners with the country's king and queen.

"It's like someone handed me a movie script," she said. "All of a sudden I had a closet full of evening gowns."

Her art had to adjust as well. She settled in a remote area on an island, with the nearest bus stop seven kilometers away. This wasn't the kind of place where she could ask a neighbor to strip and model for her.

Martha Edelheit, *Seals, Central Park Zoo* (1970-71). Courtesy of the artist and Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

"I think it was Rubens who said, 'I paint what's in front of my nose,'" she said. "And I looked out the window and what was in front of my nose was sheep. So, I did. I've been working with sheep and landscape for the last umpteen years."

She used materials she found in her environment, making canvases out of chicken wire and papier-mâché and creating a lot of wire sculptures of sheep.

Now another change is looming. Following Nilsson's death in 2020, Edelheit wants to return to New York. She spent several months in the city coinciding with her exhibitions at the Jewish Museum and Eric Firestone.

The stay brought back the memories of all the people who used to be part of her life, the models who became her friends, the 5,000-square-foot studio at the Hotel Wales on Madison Avenue and East 92nd Street (where she paid $125 a month in rent).

Once again seeing the paintings she created in that studio has been intense.

"I look at this stuff and I find it hard to believe I did it," Edelheit said. "I'm amazed at how complex it is. It feels wonderful to have this work out there and looked at, to have some recognition and acceptance for what I've worked on all my life."

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