The Year of Looking Remotely

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| Belinda Scerri0:00:02 - 0:00:24 | Hello and welcome to GAPS, a podcast produced through the center of Visual Arts at the University of Melbourne. We'd like to begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung people of the Eastern Eastern Kulin nation, upon whose unceded lands we live and work. We pay our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:00:28 - 0:00:56 | Maybe we won't take it for granted so much. I think we would always complain this time a year ago. Oh, there's too many art fairs. There's too many Biennales. There's too many this. There's too many that. We get fair fatigue. Maybe we'll realize what's important. And that's just seeing the art. Maybe it's not so much the dinners, all the parties afterwards. Maybe, maybe, I don't know? Maybe we will appreciate a little bit more. |
| Belinda Scerri0:00:58 - 0:02:09 | This is Nikki Iacovella. She is the new director of the Outsider Art Fair, Paris and New York, and she's been based in New York for over a decade. I first met Nikki about 15 years ago, when we were both working in commercial galleries in Australia. My name is Belinda Scerri, and I'm here today with my colleague from the University of Melbourne, Center of Visual Art Graduate Academy, Chris Parkinson. We both spent far too much time in 2020 looking at art online and dreaming of our next visit to a gallery or a glass of wine at an opening with friends. I've admired Nicki and her work in global art fairs and on the New York gallery scene for years. Who better then to discuss the impact of the pandemic on commercial galleries and art fairs, the need for greater cultural diversity and gallery staff and artists, especially in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement the unexpected pleasures to be found in smaller exhibition crowds and how the pandemic might permanently alter the way artists make art, |
| Belinda Scerri0:02:09 - 0:03:11 | the way galleries display art and how we view it. I'd like to welcome our guests today: Nikki, would you like to tell us a little bit about your new position with the Outsider Art Fair this year and also what you've done previously in the arts? Sure, so I'll start. Hi, everyone. Firstly, thank you for having me. It's really great to be here. I was only recently, earlier in September 2020 appointed director of the Outsider Art Fair in New York and Paris. Before that, I was a managing director of Ah Contemporary Art Gallery here in New York, Peter Freeman Inc um, previous to that I was exhibition and project, exhibitor and project manager for Art Basel. So my current position in New York at the OutsiderArt Fair is yeah, directing and art fair and facing the challenges that we're currently facing during a pandemic, which are obviously wide and varied, and, and looking at what, what an art fair means in this, in this current time. |
| Belinda Scerri0:03:11 - 0:03:21 | I just wanted to go back to that point of the pandemic and what challenges the art fair faces, uh, during the pandemic. Could you tell us a little bit about that? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:03:22 - 0:04:43 | The art fair faces many challenges during a pandemic. Usually the goal of an Art Fair is to cram as many VIP and art collectors from all around the world, as well as galleries from all around the world into one convention center. You know, tens of thousands of people, over five days, so obviously we can't do that anymore. So what? How do you keep the brand alive, and how do you keep the fair relevant? What we've seen in the last six months is a trend towards the online platform, which Art fairs are encompassing. With the outsider Art Fair. We're trying to extend the on that.We are offering an online platform for our exhibitors and for our collectors. But for the Paris edition, we're going to do a small curated exhibition at Drouot Auction House. And that encompasses about 30 artworks in a small space, and people in Paris can come and visit the show, time ticketing, you know,at Drouot they have, ah, Covid plan in place. So it's really how to engage everyone. How to engage the collector, how to engage our exhibitors, who are struggling financially, a lot of them, how to keep the identity of the art fair when we can't have a not fair as such. |
| Belinda Scerri0:04:43 - 0:05:09 | I think everyone's going to miss the crowds and the bars of the art fair. It's hard to experience that through an online platform I wanted to address that idea of the Outsider Art Fair. Previously, when we've spoken, you've mentioned the problems of diversity both within the commercial world and how the gallery sector is dealing with the BlackLives Matter Movement, and addressing that in its exhibitions. Could you speak to that a little bit? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:05:09 - 0:05:55 | Yeah, it's a big topic here, obviously brought to the forefront over the summer with George Floyd's death and Breonna Taylor's death. Historically, it seems the commercial art world has been predominantly white, predominantly white male, and we're in a culture now, where, I think rightly so, we're getting called out for that. I was reading recently, I mean from a commercial gallery point of view, galleries are looking at their artist rosters, diversifying them, and they're also looking at their staff. So we're seeing again, yeah, we're seeing these issues addressed also on a, in the contemporary art world, which is interesting. |
| Belinda Scerri0:05:56 - 0:05:59 | It makes sense, but I can see challenges ahead. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:05:59 - 0:06:24 | It's challenging because you also don't want to come off as just a knee jerk reaction, too obvious or, you know, just pandering. It's a deep rooted problem, and sometimes you really have to work on it. It can't just be fixed by signing a Black artist. There is somuch more to it than that. So, yeah, it's been it's been an interesting time for the art world, that's for sure. |
| Chris Parkinson0:06:25 - 0:06:35 | Yeah, Nikki, I'm interested in this convergence of, you know, this precarity that I guess, has emerged throughout the Black Lives Matter Moement and Coronavirus. Now, |
| Chris Parkinson0:06:37 - 0:06:51 | really amplifying this global precariousness that is existing. Do do you feel that this moment in time, that there is a resilience within galleries and art fairs to be able to speak to this precarity? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:06:51 - 0:07:09 | Well, I think they have to. And if they want to survive, I think they have to. They have to acknowledge it. Yeah, and encompass diverse and embrace diversity in all that that means. I don't think we have time anymore to - these are really important topics and the art world has to address them. |
| Chris Parkinson0:07:09 - 0:07:27 | Let's segway a little into an economic conversation as well, particularly as it exists in America. And in New York for you, Nikki. I mean what's happening within the U. S. And New York specifically to mitigate the economic vulnerability of artists and galleries at the moment. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:07:28 - 0:09:26 | Yeah, initially back in March or April, a lot of galleries applied for the PPP, which is a payment protection program, which was essentially money that would cover rent, health insurance and payroll for a certain amount of time. But what we're finding and seeing now is that a lot of that is coming to an end. So it's going to be interesting coming up, you know, in the Fall and in the next few months to see how galleries come out of that. So what these payments, what the Payment Protection Program ultimately did, was see us through the summer, which is a quiet, more or less a quiet time for us anyway. But, well, no, I guess in a couple of months, how it is gonna, I don't know. Galleries have obviously suffered a lot. There's been a lot of layoffs. Exhibitions have been cancelled. I mean, galleries will close from March till June July, so it's tough. And I think the big commercial galleries, like theDavid Zwirner, or the Larry Gagosian, they are going to be okay. And even the smaller ones, who -the emerging ones that are bare bones with very low overheads. They will be okay as well. But I do wonder about this mid tier gallery range who employ maybe 10 to 30 people, how they're going to go over the next six months or so. I think the next six months will be really telling because we are quite used to having a slow summer with slower sales. But September is the time of year here where the art world really picks up. So I think you're pivoting online, was really important and having the ability to do thatand the technology to do that. If you were already a gallery somewhat set up for doing that, the full cover it would have been a lot easier. But then I think we're also going to see a little online viewing room fatigue, which I think we're already seeing now. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:09:28 - 0:11:00 | So what does that mean? How does it get, you know? And also, financially, we've seen trends that works are purchased on an online platform less. I mean, people will buy works online, but they're not going to-at this point in time - they more likely are not going to be the large ticket items that really pay the bills and really make a gallery profit. So how is - what does a gallery do? To extend beyond that? We're atastage with the galleries now- what is it like, what does it mean to extend beyond that. And if you were financially able, I mean the Hamptons right now, or over the summer, a lot of galleries were doing satellite exhibitions, you know, renting out smaller spaces in the Hamptons. Of course, that's only a very small percentage of galleries that can afford to do that. Um, but that is another example of reinventing themselves and looking at different - You have to be open to looking to different avenues and markets, and I also think what the Outsider Art Fair is doing, is slowly introducing that in real life exhibition, which is, I think is important. No one is ready yet to, like I said, go back into a convention center. But if it's a curated space in a properly policed, safe, everyone wearing masks, temperature checks, all that type of thing. I think you know, you can start expanding yourself that way, too, and taking a little bit more of a risk in that way. |
| Belinda Scerri0:11:01 - 0:11:32 | I was interested in that. You mentioned that some of these galleries have 10 to 30 staff members. For Australians who are listening to this podcast. That's a lot of people working in a commercial gallery. Can you tell us a little bit about what those jobs are and which jobs are going to stay into the future and where the job losses are? We know that the art world shedding jobs - the Met. Museum reduced its workforce by 20% in two rounds of layoffs. What's happening in the commercial world? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:11:33 - 0:12:44 | I mean, for the case of David Zwirner - I use them again -they had to lay off 40% off their staff, and the staff that were laid off were in events, no surprise. And in events, it was in events and in art fairs. So they havestaff who are dedicatedto art fairs, staff who are dedicated to events. So, go figure they're the ones that are gonna go. The ones that are staying are the sellers. So the sales directors, probably with reduced pay sometimes and the finance, the bookkeepers, they're the ones getting the loans, they're the ones staying on top of those things. So I think sales roles, sales assistants, assistant roles, and also just as importantly, is marketing and communications and website development. So it's mainly - so obviously galleries were closed, so there were no registrars. They weren't any art handlers, gone, registrars gone. It was not, if your website is selling, you know, handling the money, you're in, which makes sense. |
| Belinda Scerri0:12:46 - 0:13:15 | It does make sense, doesn't it? Anecdotallyfriends who are curators had hoped the pandemic would provide space for delving into collections and publishing research. Yet it seems the expectation has been instead that they reduce hours and convert their existing exhibitions to virtual productions. Some collections and artists have turned to online platforms and video media. Do you think we're going to see an ongoing interest in these virtual exhibitions and video-based work, or do you think we'll return to our pre-Covid existence? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:13:16 - 0:14:17 | I don't think will return exactly to our pre-Covidexistence. I hope that we will learn something from all of this. But I do think at the end of the day people are hungry to see artin real life. You can't replicate that experience. I don't really care how much you spend on online platform. It's not the same. Yeah, I think people will crave, you know, the conversation, the sense of community, I guess, that comes from going to an art gallery opening or you know, going to an art fair and, and also that sense of discovery that you don't - you can't -that I'm finding a lot of online platforms can't really replicate. So, I do think online is here to stay. I don't think that once this is all over, we want utilizing the online platform. I just think it's a different arm of it. It's going to be one component, but it's certainly not everything. |
| Belinda Scerri0:14:18 - 0:14:26 | I would agree. I think so much of what's important in the art world happens at exhibitions and gatherings when people |
| Belinda Scerri0:14:27 - 0:14:45 | come together with the community. It's that human connection and talking about it with someone elseand as you said the way that you walk around a gallery, it's not a prescribed thing. You're often drawn to an artwork and saying things along, and it's quite a linear experience. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:14:46 - 0:15:18 | Yeah, it's been really interesting seeing how art galleries are trying to replicate, I mean how art fairs air trying to replicate that. You know, that sense of walking into an art fair? Something, you know, an artwork catching you. You know, you see something in the corner of your eye, and then you go over to that artwork and you discover a new gallery and you speak to the gallery owner, and handshakes, exchanged business cards. That act is gone, and you can't do that online. I don't think. |
| Chris Parkinson0:15:18 - 0:16:22 | So, Nicky, in 2019,a reporting for the National Endowment for the Arts, noted that over five million people are employed in the arts and culture industries in the US, many of them being self-employed. We have a similar kind of context in Australia To that, you know, it's artists that are engaged immediately to to provide, I guess you know, messages of hope and kind of ideas of hope at such a dark time. And, you know, we've seen, I guess, over the years as well, the democratisation of art and culture a little bit, where we have citizen artists being used to describe the artists who focus on using their unique skills to address social issues and fields that could be a diverse is education, diplomacy and healthcare. In your experience with artists you have worked with in New York, taking up this mantle of kind of a citizen or, you know, community -socially engaged artist, to try and address some of the issues arising from either the Trump era or or the current pandemic. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:16:25 - 0:18:20 | The one thing that now springs to mind, was just back in March or April, when it was really starting to get really bad in New York,was a lot of New York based artist formed a group and reached out to all the galleries and asked for -because a lot of art handlers and conservators and museums and art galleries have gloves and masks, and we were at a real low point here, and we could not get any PPE from anywhere. So I was working for Peter Freeman Inc at the time, and we did have boxes of gloves that we donated. The the artists weren't creating work, but they were certainly in the community helping. And also, there were a lot of artists submitting works to some hospitals and some silent auctions and things like that, that were happening online to raise money for hospitals and PPE. So what I did find early on was that there was more of a practical response over the next few months with what artists are producing I do think judging by my trip to Tribeca the other week, there are a few galleries doing a gallery opening night. When I say opening night, it's open for six hours, as supposed to two and there's crowd control. I didn't see anything particularly political, and I think that's also it's also indicative of the gallery situation and them needing to sell work. So it is, it's a really interesting timethe gallery is also facing. What's selling and what should they be showing now and, you know, offering to potential collectors. Is it something the collectors want to purchase? Political, You know, certain pieces or so it's an interesting discussion. And also, I think if we look at the Philip Guston example that's happening right now, they've postponed. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:18:21 - 0:19:12 | It was supposed to be a touring exhibition, and the four museums that were hosting it have postponed, or I don't know if they canceled -canceled the exhibition because this particular exhibition had some of Guston's paintings that depict the KKK, and I think it's a perfect time to be showing these works. But the museum's pulled back and there is currently a discussion. I know artists are signing petitions for the museums to go on with this exhibition but the museum's are claiming that it's too sensitive right now and it's too much of a hot topic. I do think commercial galleries are wary, and they do have to keep the lights on and pay their rent. |
| Belinda Scerri0:19:13 - 0:19:50 | I'm interested in that, Nikki, because it's the same and it's different too, you know, I think back to experiences like the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition that was shut, and Andres Serrano. So it's, you know, this is something that comes up periodically in the art world. I was also really interested in what you were talking about just then, that, um, kind of tension and symbiosis in the art world between the galleries and the artists, has that changed or shifted at all during this time, because galleries still have that ongoing obligation to promote their artist? But the artists want the galleries to survive. |
| Belinda Scerri0:19:51 - 0:20:21 | Yeah, what I did find early on, which I found interesting and encouraging, were artists reaching out to the galleries knowing that they're in a really hard spot. So donating works or offering to help curate exhibitions. I think those conversations wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the pandemic. So that was something that I wasn't anticipating, but it was cool to see. I was really supportive, you know, It's nice to - that relationship, that |
| Nikki Iacovella0:20:22 - 0:20:55 | there was a mutual support there. In saying that there's also been more and more talk of the argument,over the last six months that a lot of artists are cutting out the middleman, middle person, so to speak. I was reading something about it the other day, because everything is so online.I think there are more platforms that are going to come out that an artist can purchase an online viewing room themselves and upload the outworks themselves, and the buyer goes on and buys the work themselves. But I think I, don't know,I think we need galleries. |
| Belinda Scerri0:20:56 - 0:21:00 | And that's a tricky ethical question as well. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:21:00 - 0:21:07 | It's a tricky ethical question. And I think artists should just make art, I mean not just, but in the in the realm of that they should just focus on the art making process. |
| Belinda Scerri0:21:10 - 0:21:32 | I was wondering, I wanted to just go back to that time, when you realised that Covid was more than a passing virus and that it was going to have a bigger impact in the world. In the arts in particular. You were director at Peter Freeman at that point. Can you tell us about that time and also about emotionally how you felt and what it was like for you? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:21:33 - 0:22:36 | Yeah, that was really hard. That was a very stressful time. Probably the most stressful time in my career, actually. And I've had - there have been some doozies, but that second week of March going into the end of March, early April, were really rough. It was pivoting. It was closing the gallery, pivoting to selling online. And at that time, we didn't even really know what that meant. I mean, now we do, and now it's unfolded, and, you know, we've gotten better at doing it, as a whole.Both art fairs and galleries have. But back in March, early April, pivoting quickly, having discussions about who to lay off keeping people safe, applying for the payment protection program, which wasn't easy at all. So it was a lot to deal with, professionally and emotionally for a lot of people, not just us. And I do think we'll look backonthat time and, yeah, and there's still a bit of PTSD. It's pretty awful. |
| Belinda Scerri0:22:41 - 0:22:52 | I think there's that feeling that we don't know. We've seen so many second waves happening, you know? Yeah, that feeling that we're not quite out of the woods yet. At any point, we could find ourselves back there again. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:22:52 - 0:23:28 | Yeah,I don't think we are out of the woods yet. In fact, just in the last few days there has been a little peak in New York, but at that point in time, we just didn't know if we close for four weeks, or do we close for four months? And galleries are unique, I mean, it's not like, I now work for an art fair. I work from home, but for an art gallery you do have to- It's essentially a retail, and you do have to be there. It's a different - It's not just, it works better if you're there or at least if some people there to talk to. |
| Chris Parkinson0:23:29 - 0:24:03 | And I think within this, Nikki, as well, there's been a lot of despair that's happened with this context internationally. Maybe little aspects of hope. What has struck you as being a hopeful change that you might continue to be implementing, and what kind of aspects of empathy and compassion for the artists and the workers that have had to endure this as well within these professional context. What has changed there for you, or what might you take forward into the future as a positive? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:24:05 - 0:25:54 | Maybe we won't take it for granted so much. I think we would always complain this time a year ago. Oh, there's too many art fairs. There's too many biennales, there's too many this, there's too many that. This is too many. That we get fair fatigue. Maybe we'll realise what's important, and that's just seeing the art. Maybe it's not so much the dinners, all the parties afterwards. Maybe, maybe, I don't know. Maybe we will appreciate a little bit more, and I would certainly appreciate being around a room and talking about an exhibition with a group of 10 people. I won't take that for granted ever again or an artist dinner or a gallery dinner. So I do think in- when walking around Tribeca last Thursday night, even though, you know, we were all masked up, everyone was willing to do that. Everyone was willing to wait in line, because, you know, there's a 10 person capacity in some small gallery spaces. I think people are really seeing art galleries as sanctuaries, as well as museums as well. So in New York right now, it's really great because the Met and the MoMA and all the big museums have opened again. You have to book a ticket online. It's all time-ticketing. But you could go to the Met and it's not crowded, and that's a joy. I mean, there are no tourists. I way went on a Sunday morning, andthere were maybe one or two other people in the space with you, at the Met. Sothat's also been actually a cool, hopeful thing, we've been able to see the work again in real life. And I think we really realised that we've missed it and that that it is an important part of our lives. |
| Belinda Scerri0:25:56 - 0:26:00 | That sounds like such a pleasure! To have an intimate experience of art. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:26:00 - 0:26:18 | And this weekend, we have tickets to the MoMA, and we're going at 10.30am on Sunday morning. So there's going to be no one. So, yeah, that's been a cool thing. We will look back on this time when the Met is bumping again. We will kind of mourn it, I'm sure. |
| Belinda Scerri0:26:22 - 0:26:25 | Or for those of us in Australia, we will only dream of having that experience. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:26:26 - 0:26:36 | Yeah, and I can't even say,"come over now". I don't think it's even possible. We're trying. Well, there are some hopeful moments, that's for sure. |
| Chris Parkinson0:26:37 - 0:26:57 | Nikki, within that sort of context, and that sort of sanctuary of those spaces too, I then think of how maybe artists have redefined these ideas of sanctuary, and the studio and moved to works outside. Have you noticed a proliferation ofmorepublic artworks around? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:27:00 - 0:27:34 | I think we're going to see more of it. Fabulous institutions such as Public Art Fund, they're really instrumental in promoting art outside, and it's the perfect opportunity now for that to happen. And, of course, there's always amazing public sculpture exhibitions and sculpture centers. Such a Storm King, which is a outdoors museum here, that you know you have to book, and you know it get your time-ticket online. That's a really safe way to get your art fix. |
| Belinda Scerri0:27:36 - 0:27:39 | I think we're all going to be spending a bit more time outdoors in the next year. |
| Nikki Iacovella0:27:39 - 0:27:52 | Yeah, you will for sure, heading into summer. If it can be done outdoors, people are a lot more comfortable with it and understandably so. Even our talks and programs and stuff. I think that's the way to approach it this summer. |
| Belinda Scerri0:27:53 - 0:28:19 | Nicki, we were interested in the idea or the notion of affect in the art world, because art is such a sensory experience, both in the artist's articulation of their work, but also in the audience's experience. I'm wondering if you could tell us about the audience or your clients in galleries, in the last six months. Have they retreated? Or are they still engaging with art, purchasing art, supporting their favorite galleries and artists? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:28:19 - 0:29:29 | Yes, I have found they have retreated.Physically, a lot of them, especially when this happened. A lot of the big collectors left Manhattan and went out to Long Island, and they are probably still there. So yes, so that stopped. But I think they learned, like everyone else, to utilise online and use the online portals. And also it really comes down to brand recognition. And if it's a gallery that they know, if they see it online and they know that gallery, because they've visited it 10 times before, or gone to a dinner or know the owner or know the director, then there there's that comfort level of purchasing something online. So I don't think, like I was saying earlier, the price points of sales by collectors are what we were used to have, what we were used to before this, but they are there and art is certainly still moving. From my personal experiences it has been persistent but at a slightly lower price point. And you know, that might change, as people get more and more accustomed to it and do it more and more. |
| Chris Parkinson0:29:29 - 0:29:47 | Nikki is we sort of wind into 2021, ever so slowly, now. What's next for you? Specifically after the Outsider Art Fair?And how do you think your role might change, as we returnto a new normal? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:29:49 - 0:30:46 | I want to see the fair through the pandemic however long that mihgt take. It's not going to be over quickly by any means. So during these pandemic years, I want to continue to explore how to engage art collectors, artist exhibitors safely that may not be in the traditional art fair confines, whether it is by smaller exhibitions or with collaborations with different galleries. That's what's the near future for me. And then once this is over, it's just building on the Outsider Art Fair brand and encompassing all of the branches of Outsider Art, including Australian Aboriginal Art and putting more of a focus on that here is well, I think it's a good stage for that. |
| Chris Parkinson0:30:46 - 0:31:01 | I mean, within that as well, you know, and taking charge of the art fairand that history and tradition is tethered to that idea of the periphery,do you see the possibility of the periphery coming into a sharper focus within the mainstream? |
| Nikki Iacovella0:31:03 - 0:31:31 | It's definitely happening. And already we see a lot of the big commercial galleries signing up self taught artists. Yeah, I feel like it's already happening, and people are definitely more attuned to it and more comfortable with exploring that notion. So, yeah, I do think there's so much room to grow here, which is why I wanted to work there. It's it's a fascinating field. Yeah, I think I'm excited for what's next. |
| Belinda Scerri0:31:33 - 0:31:58 | I think at that juncture, we'll say thank you very much,Nikki Iacovella, for joining us on this Center of Visual Art Graduate Academy podcast. If you've enjoyed this podcast, you could join the mailing list of the center of Visual Art that's at sites.research.unimelb.edu.au/cova.There'll be a podcast series so you can listen to the other podcasts in this series. |
| Belinda Scerri0:31:58 - 0:31:59 | And you can also follow |
| Speaker 10:31:59 - 0:32:08 | the Outsider Art Fair either on Twitter or Facebook, or join their mailing list: outsiderartfair.com/contact. contact. |