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Art in Isolation: Artist Experiences during Covid-19

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Abstract: Isolation during Covid-19 has affected many artists, but the ways in which artists were affected by isolation in their art practice during Covid-19 depended on the pre-existing forms of inspiration and motivation that fueled their practice. For artists who depended more on internal motivation, isolation was a medium by which they could focus internally and channel the emotional effects of Covid and social stress into their work. Artists who were driven by external motivation did not benefit from isolation to the same degree in their work process and found other methods of motivation during physical isolation, such as social media and literature forms. For all artists, there was an adjustment period during Covid as both inner and outer worlds were disturbed; this is due to their interconnected nature. Isolation can be understood as an aesthetic experience that affects both external and internal art inspiration. Overall, artists ultimately attested to their art process changing and their artwork improving during Covid. This ethnographic research suggests that agency over aesthetic experience was asserted by artists to either circumvent or utilize physical isolation to find motivation and inspiration for art practice.

I. INTRODUCTION:

During the age of Covid, artists, like everybody else, have been heavily impacted. Galleries and museums have been closed. Art fairs rescheduled if not canceled completely, and there has been little familiarity to depend upon. As individuals have been confined to their homes, artists have had to choose between showing their art online, not showing their art at all – or perhaps the cautious invitation only gallery opening (depending on how safe one has felt going outside). The safety measures implemented to combat Covid-19 drastically affected the ways in which professional artists could create and show their work. Many artists, like other individuals, were forced into isolation. Plagues and enforced isolation are not new phenomena, but the mandated isolation during Covid was different from situations in the past due to the accessibility of the internet and the growing popularity of public media platforms such as Instagram. Because of this technology I could talk to artists even amidst quarantine. By performing digital ethnography, I hoped to see if the different ways artists responded to isolation during Covid-19 could provide any insight into how art serves as a form of mediation and communication.

Art is an expansive word whose very definition is debated; I often find it difficult to say anything definitive that is helpful to understanding art and its role in culture because of its intrinsic nature. There is an intricate network of relationships between art and artist, artist and viewer, art and viewer, that are intertwined. The communication and mediation that art performs happens on all of these different levels.

While some earlier scholars focused on art as a passive experience confined to the art object, there has been a trend to attribute power beyond the artwork and to the artist themselves. The artist can do things such as promote friction and contribute to the breaking down of outdated

power structures within society through their art practice[1]. This shift in scholarship from the art achieving something, to the artist achieving something, can be understood within many different philosophical models. Emmanuel Coccia[2] centers the image itself as a cognitive tool essential to communication with both self and other, which thus explains how art can be used to communicate between artist and art viewer. John Dewey's[3] work on art as an experience includes description of the viewer as an active participant in the art, where art is inseparable from the context and the experience of the artist themselves.

This idea of the experience of the artist and art as an active engagement can be expanded beyond the artwork and into the process of artmaking. Psychological studies have shown that artmaking has improved stress levels and provided other benefits for participants – benefits that can be seen through the practice of art therapy[4]. This empirical evidence of art practice benefit might be better conceptualized through the work of Tim Ingold[5], in which knowledge is created through the act of making itself. This theorization allows for the artist and the creation of art to be valuable even if no subsequent viewing of the art occurs.

As I began ethnographic research on artists during Covid, I found all of this previous scholarship useful. When I heard individual testimonials, I could understand them within different theoretical frameworks. However, no one model could possibly encompass the totality of artistic experience – even within the small sample that I was working with. Ultimately, art performs communication and mediation on so many different levels that talking about these intertwined concepts as they playout in the real world is exceptionally difficult. However, it can be done. I have found aesthetics a useful tool in this endeavor. Aesthetics has been discounted as an outdated and Eurocentric model by anthropologists such as Alfred Gell and Joanna Overing[6]; but French philosopher Jacques Rancière[7] has done some impressive work to rescue aesthetics

from the abyss by discussing aesthetics in conjunction with politics. By understanding aesthetics within its original conception as a form of sensory experience and judgement it can be applied to a wide variety of everyday situations such as Covid-19.

While isolation during Covid affected all artists, the ways in which artists were affected by isolation in their art practice depended on the pre-existing forms of inspiration and motivation that fueled their practice. Artists are individually driven by different factors such as material needs, social concerns, and personal therapeutic reasons, to practice artmaking. I attempted to separate these factors into an 'external' motivation, in which artists were motivated by external viewers and spectatorship, from 'internal' motivation, in which artists were artmaking primarily for themselves. Similarly, I tried to separate out the idea of inspiration, the actual material that is fueled into artmaking and determines the art product, into external and internal sources. External sources being things such as referential material, and internal sources being things such an emotion. For artists who depended more on inner motivation and inspiration, isolation was a medium by which they could focus internally and channel the emotional effects of Covid and social stress into their work. For artists who depended more on external motivation and inspiration, physical isolation was initially a struggle, but they were able to form new ways of gaining motivation and inspiration through methods such as circumventing isolation through the internet.

External and internal sources of both inspiration and motivation are interconnected, due to the material reality of sensory experience. By framing artist experiences within an aesthetic framework, I was able to examine how the internal and external states of an artist were connected to bodily reality, and thus influenced by both the Covid crisis as well as actions taken to increase or limit sensory experience during the pandemic. All of the artists I interviewed

exerted agency over their sensory experiences during Covid to either utilize their physical isolation to benefit their art practice or circumvent physical isolation. By asserting agency over sensory experience, artists were able to empower themselves during Covid, forming new insights into their practice, developing new process, and improving their artwork.

II. RESEARCH BEGINS

I conducted ethnographic research on the Chicago artist population to examine the changes artists are experiencing during the Covid-19 pandemic. The entirety of my research was conducted online and my recruitment took place over social media due to the pandemic. Social media is thus a contextual theme in my ethnography as all my participants had some sort of engagement with it.

I started by performing participant observation on a Facebook site that was specific to Chicago, whose name I have excluded to preserve anonymity. I performed my observation between January and March of 2021 on a group that was primarily dedicated to the traditional visual arts such as painting and drawing. Online membership grew significantly during my time observing this group, starting at approximately 450 members in January, and reaching approximately 700 by the end of April. Most posts were consistently artists sharing their own work. It also included endorsements for online art shows and opportunities for artists. There was limited interaction between the participants in this group. There tended to be a restrained response to posts, mainly shown with a few likes or limited, general comments such as “nice” or “good work”. The audience participation with online artwork appeared stilted, in that members did not appear to interact with each other on a personal level or share their insights or thoughts on posted work beyond mentioning that they liked it. I believed that these consistent posts indicated that artists continued to create in physical isolation. I thought that the lack of

interaction between artists online might indicate that artist isolation was not being alleviated through online media, but the increase in group membership showed that the community seemed to be attempting to develop new tools to combat this isolation. This attempt to circumvent physical isolation was shown by ongoing experimentation into the format of online shows – such as the addition of online art receptions.

In brief observation of non-geographically focused groups there appeared to be more discussion and a greater sense of community among members. In these other groups, artists would often post a piece and ask for help on a section they were grappling with or share information about struggling to get back to the studio.

I recruited my research participants for my survey and extended interviews from three different Chicago artist groups on Facebook; one of which I performed my extended observation on, and another two Facebook sites that appeared to have a similar level of participation. In total I received 19 responses to my survey. Most questions[8] had a distribution of answers, with the exception of two questions which had 80%+ respond in the same manner.

The survey indicated that artwork improved during Covid and that process changed for most artists. In response to, "Do you feel that your art has improved/worsened/stayed the same during Covid," 15 participants indicated that their art had improved during Covid. One participant who indicated that their art had "improved during Covid" commented that this was "As far as having much deeper meaning." Two individuals that did not answer with improved/worsened/same, wrote into the comment option that their art had just "changed". One individual picked "stayed the same" but went on to comment that it was "Hard to say. When the lockdown first began, I had a flurry of creativity and produced 6 or 7 artworks in record time. Since then, I've had a long "down" period—but I'm not sure that can be ascribed to the

pandemic." Only one individual said that their art had worsened during Covid, and they went on to comment that it was difficult to be motivated and get any work done. In response to "has Covid affected your artmaking process?" all 19 survey participants responded, with 16 answering that yes, it had, and three answering no. One individual additionally commented that "My work is morphing", another shared that "I've been painting a series called social distancing."

At the end of my survey, I asked whether survey participants were interested in participating in an interview. 10 of the 19 survey participants indicated that they would be interested. I contacted seven of these 10 people. I excluded two due to their focus on public art, versus studio practice, and the third due to their lower time commitment with art, as they indicated they spent one to five hours per a week on art practice. I decided to focus on studio artists in my interviews because I wanted to avoid feasibility issues of art practice during Covid. All seven of the contacted individuals responded, and I was able to interview six of these seven.

All interviewees self-identified as professional artists within Chicago, in that they showed and sold work publicly, but financial dependence on art practice varied. All interviewees were women. This was not purposeful but may indicate something regarding the population of studio artists that were both exposed to my online survey recruitment posts and willing to share their experiences. Interviews were open-ended, but I had a list of questions[9] to help guide our conversations. Interviews ranged from forty minutes to eighty minutes and were conducted over Zoom. I have used pseudonyms throughout this essay to preserve privacy. While I did not ask ages, the interview population was skewed older, with two mentioning grown children, and a third stating that "I'm old." While I approached research with an interest in isolation, five of the six individuals I interviewed lived with a partner.

III. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Professional artists are motivated to do art by different factors such as social issues, art community, and emotional state. While these factors do not cleanly divide, I am using the term externally motivated artists to indicate those artists whose art is more driven by viewer and spectator response to their artwork (aka community, social issues, the purpose of their artwork), and internally motivated artists to indicate those artists who are more driven by the actual process of artmaking (aka doing art for themselves rather than viewers).

These factors of external and internal motivation of the artist can also track onto the inspiration of the artwork. I am calling inspiration the process which forms the actual content found in the artwork. Externally inspired artists may use referential materials such as pictures or a specific social issue they want to talk about. Internally inspired artists may indicate a more instinctive art practice that starts from an emotional place. These divisions intertwine through the process of artmaking. Those artists who were initially externally inspired found deep internal inspiration during the process of making as they created knowledge and had a dialogue with the piece. Those artists who were initially internally inspired would find in process or in retrospect that factors in their external life experience tracked into their work - such as finding Covid themes in a painting that they did not intend to have anything to do with Covid. This is due to the sensory experience of the artist as an individual.

Bodily experience cannot be separated from the internal state of mind. During Covid isolation the changes in sensory experience affected external and internal motivation and inspiration differently depending on the initial place that the artists started their work, but isolation itself was a sensory experience that they could either utilize or circumvent through asserting agency over their sensory experiences.

i. MOTIVATION

Why do artists do art? And how has this been affected by isolation?

Covid isolation caused different effects on my interviewees' art process depending on the artist's personal philosophy on the purpose of art and their own art practice. Each artist experienced a different source of motivation for their artwork. Those artists who found motivation externally experienced initial issues finding that motivation during Covid-19 lockdown due to doubt regarding arts social role during Covid, and their physical ability to participate in those social realms. Other artists found motivation internally in forms such as personal practice for therapeutic reasons. These internally motivated artists may not have had issues with their practice during Covid-19 isolation, but still may have experienced mental and emotional burdens that prevented artmaking. There was crossover between internal and external motivation for artists.

I am calling external motivation that art which is motivated by some sort of viewer or spectator-based interest or purpose. Professional artists can be motivated by both internal and external factors, however, artists that were more invested in the art community and the social role of their artwork tended to be more externally motivated. Some of these external factors were more material concerns such as financial motivations.

"I feel validated when I get cash. Cash!" Mary exclaimed. "My father was an artist and he goes, 'we're all dreamers, and what we dream about most is money'."

Mary is an older artist whose education was originally in the performing arts, and she worked in the theater for many years. She decided to go back to school to be a graphic artist in her thirties but took a hiatus and the advances in technology during that time made it difficult for her to stay in the field. She started working more in the fine arts, something she did not have an

education in. With a passion for baseball, Mary is a portrait artist that focuses on baseball player portraits as well as blues musicians. However, the commission work she does is often much more specific, such as family portraits or pet portraits.

When finances drive practice, spectatorship and viewer response is necessarily important. After all, you don't make money if you don't sell anything. Mary depended largely on art commissions during Covid but found that due to the rise in home improvements, she had a lot of commissions coming in and thus maintained external motivation.

But something else that selling art provides is validation to the artist. This validation does not require a sale.

At 28, Rebecca was the youngest artist I interviewed. A formally taught artist with both a BA and MFA in the fine arts, she is an oil painter that works fulltime painting. She has historically been quite active in the art community: taking education opportunities, attending museums and gallery openings, and enjoying feedback on her own work during shows. She struggled with motivation for art practice during Covid because seeing people respond to her artwork was an important part of Rebecca's motivation practice. She wanted to do better and felt boosted and energized by complements and comments about her work. The audience was a part of the process that got her into the studio and working.

"I feel like a lot of it is um, there's definitely an energy you get from your own shows. When my works on a wall, I become very creepy. My husband, and my friends and I, whoever will often go, kind of, you know, you wander around the show, but you always keep an eye out for who's looking at your work. And you kind of try to keep an ear out for what they're saying. And when they're saying the things that you were kind of hoping you were trying to provoke them to say, it's like, 'Ah, I'm on the right track'. Or sometimes they'll say something that like,

you're like, ‘Oh, I hadn't thought of that’. And then you're like, ‘Oh, I want to make something that will provoke them to say that more or say that in a different way’. And so it's always giving you new ideas. And when you're in other people's shows, it's, ‘Oh, I can make this. Oh, I want to try that’.”

When she heard comments or received compliments, she said she felt validated. Rebecca felt motivated by the viewers response to her paintings.

When focusing on art from the standpoint of viewability, audiences are not just observers, but equal participants within an artistic experience as the artwork interacts with its audience and creators. This sort of equal participation was elaborated in Alfred Gell’s work where he defined art as an active object with agency. He argued that art does work – and if it doesn’t, it isn’t really art[10]. With this definition, art was not confined to the role of a passive object but was instead an active participant with its environment. Content and context both matter to art because they influence the way in which that art impacts the viewer.

These theorizations of art as an active object that performs ‘work’, and the essential nature of the spectator, are invoked in expansive discussions of the role of the artist in the community. Thierry de Duve discusses what this role of the artist is through discussion of the emancipation project and the resulting emancipation maxima, wherein the artist works towards breaking down power structures and inequities[11]; art has a social role in which it purposefully forms friction and provokes thought. These concerns over the social importance of artwork seem to assert that ‘art must be seen to be art’, or that ‘art is art when it is labelled art’.

Of utmost importance here, is that while Gell and Duve talk about what art does and thus how art should be defined, my ethnography is focusing on the artist. In looking at the external motivation of the artists during Covid, the factual actuality of whether or not the artwork was

performing ‘work’ was fairly irrelevant. *Instead, what mattered was whether the artist felt like their artwork was performing work. The artists perception on whether their art did or did not have social relevance impacted the artists motivation and subsequent ability to create art.*

During Covid-19, several artists expressed thoughts regarding the importance, or non-importance, of their art within the context of the pandemic. Rebecca felt that the art she did was not important with everything that was going on, and she then struggled with motivation.

“I've had to work to get myself motivated for the first time in my life. I have never not wanted to make stuff until, like, a few weeks into lockdown when I was just like this, why am I doing like, What? Why am I doing this, this doesn't matter. It would only matter if I were an epidemiologist.”

Emphasizing purpose explains why artists that were motivated by the social role of their artwork struggled during Covid; they lacked a physical connection with spectatorship. I felt that this concern regarding the relevance and purpose of their artwork during Covid indicated a personal philosophy in which the external viewer or spectator was centered as essential to the artwork itself. There was a motivation based on the response others had to the artwork, and thus some of the artists I interviewed struggled with this isolation from audience.

Karen is a self-taught artist that works full-time in addition to her art practice. She started working with collage and transitioned to painting as she slowly started attending art fairs and showing her work online and through galleries. She does mainly abstract painting and makes sales through social media. Karen spoke about art as a highly individual practice she did for her mental and emotional health that was separate from her livelihood, even though she does sell her art. During Covid she initially felt she needed to gear her work to provide her viewers with

positive enforcement during the pandemic but returned to a therapeutic practice after initial difficulties.

“Like I felt like I needed to do something more. I don't even know why, like more cheerful or more like, I don't know, showing how we're together. And then it just wasn't right. I was like, that's, it's not what I do,” Karen said.

Karen felt that she needed to change her artwork to adequately address the changing social circumstances of the world. However, she struggled to create art and wasn’t happy with the art she did create when she was in this mindset.

While Karen and Rebecca struggled to make art because they were concerned about relevance for viewers, Deborah didn’t have this problem. While she was also concerned about her art performing a function, she did not doubt that the work she was doing had contextual significance.

Deborah is an older woman with grown children who received her BA from The Art Institute, and then took a hiatus from art for some time before starting to work for a local art center, a job she had for ten year. This job was as an event director, but as she connected with more artists and showed them some of her old work, she was encouraged to start working again. Deborah lost this job at the art center due to Covid but took the extra time she had after she lost her job to work more on her art, which is primarily sculpture. She is now represented with two different galleries, moderates her own Facebook site for Chicago artists, and has participated in several online shows throughout Covid.

“This is a time when there's so much to say. And the nice thing for me is that my skills and techniques have gotten to a point where when I have something to say, I know how to actually get it out, you know, in the world. So it's a great time for me to be an artist,” she said.

That theme of having something to say through her artwork, a message, was continual throughout the interview with Deborah.

“My current work is meant to be a little more thought provoking, because I have a-a message to say and I'm not going to hit you over the head with it, but you know, you need to stop and look at. And that's been really gratifying when I go to the shows, you know, I've invited a couple of my friends. And they look at the work and they, they get it,” she laughs. “And it's yeah, it's, it's a really good feeling.”

Each of the artist’s that described external motivation had a different experience. Mary was financially driven, so her motivation depended on commissions and client interest, commissions that increased during Covid. Rebecca was driven by viewer response and validation in the past but struggled because she felt her work wasn’t relevant to the current cultural context. Karen traditionally wasn’t externally driven but felt that she should target her artwork towards spectators because of Covid-19. Deborah found her externally driven artwork to be bolstered during Covid-19, as she had new things to say and felt confident in both their importance and her ability to express them.

Artists experienced changes in how their art was motivated due to their external motivation altering during Covid. Deborah became more active in online shows, and even continued doing shows in person; she navigated around Covid isolation to ensure her art was still seen and found the social impacts of Covid an intense motivation for her to work. Rebecca found a new source of motivation in the form of literature and reached out to her online network for support. Karen recalibrated so that she wasn’t worried about her work needing to be socially significant; she returned to an internal motivation rather than an external motivation. These

artists had adjustment periods but ultimately all found ways to motivate their art practice during Covid.

In contrast to external motivation, some people are motivated to practice art by some sort of internal or personal impact. Artmaking is a form of problem solving and has been adopted both informally and in structured formats to benefit a wide range of participants. In art therapy, art is used as a tool to articulate experiences that subjects may be unable to put into words. Artmaking is often described as a therapeutic experience that produces positive emotions. Personal testimonials of the benefits of artmaking and exposure to the arts are widespread, but access to these activities varies.

There are a wide range of studies that have examined the impacts of artmaking and art viewing on the mental acuity of participants. These studies include different study populations, forms of art engagement, time engaging in art activities, etc. While the degree of effectiveness varies, these studies have overwhelmingly shown benefits from arts participation. These benefits largely surround areas of stress and anxiety[12], and general feelings of wellbeing[13]. These improvements in stress, anxiety, etc. have been shown across different age ranges, states of health, levels of prior arts engagement, and more. The reported stress relief and increased feelings of wellbeing have been consistent and statistically significant, and the ways in which these benefits have been measured vary. Biological markers such as the stress hormone cortisol and measures of heart rate have been shown to decrease after artmaking.

Karen spoke about art as a highly individual practice she did for her mental and emotional health. When talking about her art practice, she said that “Well it just kind of calms my mind down” and that “It gives me like a release.”

I asked her to expand on this.

“I've been in therapy before, but like, I feel like it's also helped me not be in therapy. Like it's, it's like if I just have this, it gives me a space in my brain to just kind of get away and not obsess about things or, um, connect with how I'm feeling.”

This sort of benefit found in artwork led to some artists increasing art practice during Covid. This was the experience that Edith had.

Edith is an older woman with grown children. She went to art school for drawing and went on to get a MA in printmaking and work at a lithography shop. Edith left the artworld for many years to raise several children. She had negative feelings about the artworld due to the response artist friends had to her personal decisions. Edith started drawing more in her studio once her children were older and was encouraged by friends to start sharing her work and posting on social media. She has now had several shows and sells her work but does not enjoy publicly participating in the artworld. During Covid, Edith found a surge of artistic energy.

“I kept drawing nonstop like, it was crazy and when I was drawing, I felt wonderful. I have some skeletal health issues, so I’m always in pain, and it’s been a new way of life, and when I draw, it goes, I barely notice it, I’m in a different place, so when Covid started and all I had to do was draw all day, and I didn’t have the stress of openings or making sure I was in contact with one person or another, going to doctors’ appointments, I mean clearly I didn’t have to do anything and I loved it.”

Isolation is generally accepted to be detrimental to mental health, and overall anxiety levels during Covid isolation were found to be higher. However, individuals display a wide range of resilience to isolation[14]. This resiliency to isolation can be conceptualized by the division of those who experience the negative effects of loneliness, and thus who experience the more

positive effects of solitude[15]. These positive effects of solitude were displayed in my interview with Edith who enjoyed staying at home away from social stresses.

Rebecca struggled with isolation as she dealt with loneliness and anxiety. Psychological benefits of art practice may explain how the importance of art in Rebecca's personal life changed during Covid.

"All of a sudden, painting had to become and did become the space where I felt safest. Because it was the only space in the universe I can control with my 10 foot by 12 foot studio, which I have complete control over - my husband does not come in here unless he really needs a hammer. Like, it's just mine. And so this was the only aspect of the world where I have my mask off and my window open. And like, I couldn't catch Covid in here. And I would turn my phone off. Or I would just like have my computer open. Where like the only I messages I could get were from my mom. And so I couldn't get any bad news. And so the flip of that was like, my process changed because painting took on this kind of emotional heaviness that it hadn't had for me before."

When I asked Rebecca to expand on this, she called her studio a "haven".

"I know what's going to happen to my studio and I know what my - I'm going to hear and so anything that seems dangerous can skip through it unlike in the real world, where like, I didn't know if it was safe for me to walk outside. I didn't know if it was - you know - I didn't know if my parents were safe, I didn't know if my friends were safe. I - everyone in here was safe and this wasn't going anywhere and so painting took on this like haven like quality where I was just in control and I knew all the processes and I knew that I was good at them and I knew that I could fix any mistakes I made. There was no-there were no permanent mistakes."

This haven like quality of the studio internally motivated Rebecca to do art, even as she struggled with the loss of external motivation. Internal and external motivation are not separate; both affect artists.

Not only do both internal and external motivation affect artists but depending on artist personality and other things going on in their lives, one may be more prevalent at sometimes, and of little importance at others. Karen has been primarily internally motivated throughout the history of her art career, but for a period at the beginning of the pandemic, she altered her art practice due to external motivation. She felt that she should be creating things more geared towards spectators. As she adjusted to the changing social atmosphere she returned to her traditional internally motivated practice.

“I've always kind of turned to art when I'm really down or you need, just keeps surviving sort of. So I thought, well, what else am I going to do? And if it's not going, if I don't have a goal of, it's not going to a gallery, it's not going to commission. It's not going to a show. It's not going, you know, I could still just paint and not worry about where it goes. And then it was, I was in a better frame, like by May or June, I could just kind of work on things. And I do look back at those and those aren't my favorite either. But at least I was doing kind of what I usually do.”

This acceptance that her art was for her helped her get back to what she usually did, her abstract painting that gave her peace of mind. Once she wasn’t worried about her work needing to address the crisis going on, she was able to start working again. She felt like she “just needed that routine” of art, as a means of survival. “If I’m going to be here and I need to survive in my house, I need to also do art still.”

These benefits of artmaking might be especially important during quarantine, as even among non-artists, art practice has increased during Covid[16]. As Karen stated, she needed to survive in her house.

ii. INSPIRATION

If motivation is what I am calling the desire for an artist to work, inspiration is what I am calling the 'source' of the material engineering the actual artwork product. Inspiration is what happens after the artist is initially motivated to go to their studio. Just like motivation, inspiration can be broadly tracked through conceptualizing different external and internal sources of inspiration.

Deborah, Mary, and Rebecca all started their artwork with external inspiration. Deborah started an art piece with a specific social issue in mind. Mary used source material to start her portraits. Rebecca worked with vintage photographs. Meanwhile, Edith and Karen both found internal inspiration. They started their pieces from what seemed to be a more emotional place.

While artists may have initially started an art piece with an external or internal inspiration, these sources of inspiration intertwined through the process of artmaking itself. There was a change in inspiration through creation. I found this to be evident in the way Ellen talked about artists' relationships with their own artwork.

Ellen is an encaustic artist as well as art educator. Her and her partner developed an online arts membership during Covid to sustain themselves financially when Covid restrictions cancelled their art classes and this membership provided a private community where members could communicate and access educational material. Separate from her business, Ellen has been very active throughout Covid supporting the art community. She has not had as much time to

create work during the pandemic due to these intensive time commitments but had unique insights about the art community and the emergence of online connection.

“Any artist will tell you, art is a dialogue with the piece. It's not like ‘I'm going to paint that and make it look like this’. I mean, it becomes this, um, sometimes the work takes the artist somewhere, you know? Um, so it really is a um collaboration, you know, with the work,” Ellen said.

Art process, the act of making, can be understood as an emergent process of growth by placing the artist, or maker, “from the outset as a participant in amongst a world of active materials”[17]. This collaboration, this emergence, occurred in Deborah’s process as her external inspiration morphed during process.

“Because we're in our homes, looking at the world that's coming into us - the room - a screen of some kind. We're reacting to what's going on out there, at least, this definitely is what's happening to me, with my art, is I'm doing a lot of reacting to what's going on out in the world.

“I’m really feeling who these characters are going to be and it’s just, it’s a fascinating process for me because I’ll start with an idea and I think I know what it’s going to be, and then it will go in this direction and it, you know, it’s better than I thought it would be, so you know, that’s something that I love about my art too is that I have a plan but through it enough that it can blossom into something else.”

This blossoming occurs because “even if the maker has a form in mind, it is not this form that creates the work. It is the engagement with materials”[18]. This engagement, or dialogue, with the material emphasizes how the act of making becomes necessarily internal, and indeed personal.

“So, what are you feeling during those times?” I asked Deborah.

“Oh, it’s just, you know, it’s just, like your imagination takes away, and the way – like – I’m very tactile with my art. I have, my wire and, you know, my needle nose pliers and my snippers and you know, I’m really just, very tactile, and very, I’m feeling it as it comes along, and it, several of them have taken on their own characteristics that I didn’t even know were there.”

This metamorphosis of inspiration during process appeared to me as a form of communication with self, an active mediation that was *not* unidirectional. Mary expressed this relationship between external and internal inspiration through the process of making her portraits.

“Things do not happen when I'm painting. I get up and I start painting and I'll realize at three o'clock in the afternoon, I haven't brushed my teeth,” she said.

“What kind of gets you in the zone like that? Well, what are you feeling when you paint?” I asked.

“Well, it's usually portraits. And I fall in love with the person I'm painting or the dead cat I'm painting. You want to make it great. You want to do well by it, the person or the dead cat,” she said.

I found this description of falling “in love” during the process of painting very interesting. Was Mary coming to know this person through the process of making their portrait? If I understand making within Tim Ingold’s theory of making as a form of knowledge creation, in which knowledge emerges through process, the answer is yes. The work of art emerges and exists within the mediation occurring between artist and material as a conceptual experience.

If Mary experienced a change from external to internal inspiration during the process of knowledge creation, Edith experienced an internal to external inspiration. She expressed how

external inspiration, in the form of Covid, found its way into her artwork during her making process.

"As the virus progressed it progressed into my work, and it just got excruciating to draw, it got more and more excruciating all the time, so I finally ended up – maybe you can see this – this is the last excruciating one I did." Edith pointed to a large drawing on the wall.

"Why was it excruciating?" I asked. "Ah, why do you describe it that way?"

"Because-Because to draw like this I was so deep inside myself, and everything inside myself was painful. I mean just the idea of all these organisms that we can't see that are ruining the world and they're taking over -you know it's like a science fiction horror film, and that's the way it felt, and so, close to the end of it, you can see near the top," she pointed to the top of the painting.

"I thought to myself, you have to keep remembering that there are still silver linings here, because, because every time I was drawing, I was drawing in tears. It became very difficult to keep drawing when I just knew I was going to be nauseous."

Edith was also performing knowledge creation. As she went through the process of making, she was learning about Covid and how she was both thinking and feeling about the external world. Through artmaking Edith was thinking with and through the materials, because "These materials think in us, as we think through them"[19]. Even though Edith started from an internal place, her work was always going to reflect the external because the artist is a part of their surroundings – the materials that "think in us" are external to the artist themselves. Artwork cannot be separated from context. Edith herself realized this as she continued to work, and chose to open herself up to the external, in the form of accepting Covid and taking it with her.

"I thought I needed to put Covid behind me. And take this leap. And it was totally wrong. In fact, what I needed to do was integrate into my life and into opening up. Like take Covid with me as I walk into a gallery now – if I get up the nerve. Or get up the nerve to walk in a grocery store. So um, So I think integrating things is what it's all about and what helped me move on," she said.

Art is not made in a void, because artists do not live in one. History, culture, personality even – these qualities translate into the object of an artists' creation. Right now, during the Covid era, it would be near impossible to find an art piece being produced that is not somehow influenced. Even if it is the same subject matter, the same medium, as what would be used in 'before Covid' times, the artist themselves is different. The artist exists in that moment of creation with the creation itself, and this is shown, is implemented, in their work. John Dewey spoke of art as an experience, as an active engagement; the artist is an active agent and contextuality is thus essential to the art piece itself[20]. Contextualization is essential as the experience of art is inseparable from the experience of the artist and environment espoused. Dewey argued that the artist's thought merges into the very object. Through this process, art connects the present with both the past and the future. Art cannot be understood by itself because it is only one element of the connection and mediation between humanity and the outside world.

This contradicts with the viewpoint some hold that the artist and the art piece are separate from one another. In this more traditional view, the artist is but a medium, just as a computer is today, waiting patiently before transcribing the art that comes into their mind. If this is true than the artist does not matter to the art. The location and temporality of the piece makes no difference because the art piece is timeless. To maintain this view would be to ignore a great deal of history and our modern understanding of disingenuous practices such as art appropriation, an

act of disempowerment[21]. Art cannot be separated from context because art is a result of context. Art forms themselves stem from cultural practices and traditions.

Discourse regarding art as a form of communication and mediation is extensive but varies in the foundational ways the purpose and definition of art is approached. Emmanuel Coccia centers art as an integral part of culture by focusing on the image as the very concept of the sensible life. However, the image itself doesn't exist, but is instead dependent on our perception, and this perception is not just visibility – but the becoming of phenomena, aka, the thing outside of us has to meet with the organs of perception. Due to the nature of this perception, there is a gap between the reality and phenomenon. By this definition, Coccia argues that we ourselves only become sensible within the mirror, when we are thus perceptible to ourselves[22]. The mirror is thus the means by which our form becomes image. The mirror proves that the image is something real that is yet separate. Within this context, the image, such as visual art and material culture, is not only an integral part of culture, but the way in which communication and common experience is formulated. Art is not just a method of culture and a tool of communication, but a central component of cognition.

I felt that artmaking was deeply personal to all of my interviewees. In my discussion with artists, I was interested in the way process seemed to make things perceivable to the artist themselves. The cognitive power of the image and the knowledge creation power of making worked in tandem with each other to produce an art piece, an art piece that acted upon the artist even as the artist acted upon it.

iii. ISOLATION

In order to better explore art process in conjunction with isolation, I wanted to look at a situation of isolation that was separate from Covid. Cases of enforced isolation have generally

occurred within the context of crises that are very complex. Whether the example be that of plague, war, exile, prison, etc. most cases of enforced isolation have been accompanied by grief, death, illness, and other unpleasant occurrences with psychological impacts. Physical isolation due to quarantine during Covid-19 was no different.

Rebecca struggled with motivation and getting into the studio for some time because there was a lot going on in her life.

“Last year, my husband and I both got Covid um, and for more than a month, I couldn't be in my studio, like, my - I was lucky, I didn't get too sick. My husband got very sick, and I had to take care of him. Thankfully, he's fine. Now he's 100% back in health. Absolutely, thank goodness. But you know, I couldn't even be in my studio, like, I didn't have time when you're taking care of like a 30 year old man who turns into a baby when he's sick, like you can't, you know, it's like, work or like, watch my husband's pulse oxygen monitor, like, obviously, you're gonna watch the oxygen monitor, so my ability to spend time in my studio for a long time was impacted and after that I got pneumonia. And then after that, I was in a car wreck and like, so like that aspect of like, it's took me a long time to even get back into my studio,” Rebecca explained.

Similarly, Mary struggled to paint for several months at the beginning of Covid.

“See when COVID first hit, I lost three friends and then my mom died and then I got kicked out of my apartment and my dog walking business pfft. So I was stressed out,” she said.

In order to look at isolation separately from psychological stress factors, I turned to a historical artist who purposefully isolated herself. This artist wrote extensively on the benefits of isolation for art practice and provided unique insight into the connection between inspiration and isolation.

Agnes Martin was a mid-century artist that is often associated with the minimalist art movement. This art movement was largely defined by a desire for a pure art that did not include any referential material. Her personal philosophical orientation led to Martin leaving a successful art career in New York City to resettle in a town in New Mexico. She spent several years in reflection without painting, and while her paintings were brought to New York and sold once she began practicing again, she remained in New Mexico where she cultivated isolation and an ascetic lifestyle[23].

In "advice to young artists"[24] Martin explained what she considered the ideal artist's life, as "inspired, self-sufficient and independent (unrelated to society)"; these three attributes are all things which Martin strove to achieve during her own life, thus connecting her extreme adherence to these ideas and lifestyle directly to her identity as an artist. An artist's life was to be both unconventional and a struggle which was "painfully against its own conditioning". This painful struggle against conditioning may be a good description of Martin's own struggle against societal norms. In Agnes Martin's view, this struggle was connected to the art merely as an addendum to the artist. The artist would not be contented until they recognized themselves in the work, and this would be the only way to find satisfaction. According to Martin, the purpose of an isolated lifestyle was ultimately to reach a state in which the artist could be happy and satisfied, because to Martin nothing but success with artwork would create satisfaction for the artist. Martin's drive for independence was directly connected to this need to satisfy herself as an artist.

In a 1977 conversation with art dealer Arne Glimcher[25], Martin connected her desire for isolation to her practice as an artist. She spoke about the importance of eliminating distractions while painting – going so far as to remove her telephone and saying that her neighbors were afraid of her due to how fiercely she protected her solitude. This elimination of distractions was

not solely from social elements. She refrained from external pleasures such as eating and comfort while sleeping, because she did not want these comforts to provide any sort of illusion. She wanted "a greater awareness of reality".

Agnes Martin's writings and her life as a whole show how isolation can be used as a medium for artistic creation by ensuring a certain state of internal inspiration for artwork. Martin used isolation as a medium that she purposefully cultivated in order to ensure that creative inspiration stemmed from an internal element, rather than from some sort of referential input. By filtrating the external input that may alter her understanding of her inner, innate inspiration that came to her, Martin used isolation as a tool by which to control the direction of her artwork. This was all done in an effort to create a certain aesthetic in her art, that of a "pure emotion"[26].

Ultimately, her ascetic and isolated lifestyle did not prevent external input into her internal world and her artwork, but instead provided a level of control so that this isolation and ascetic lifestyle *was* the external input that cultivated her inner inspiration. While Martin controlled the external input into her life through isolation, it is important to note that she was not in total isolation. Her prolific paintings were still gaining acclaim in New York and her art dealer would visit occasionally over the years.

Agnes Martin's effort to create a pure art by isolating herself from outside influences implies that her artwork was driven by an internal inspiration rather than any external input. Indeed, she avoided all externality to preserve this inspiration as purely as she could. However, due to the sensory perception of the human body, total avoidance of externality is impossible. Despite Martin's intentions, it is impossible to separate the internal from the external. *Physical isolation does not prevent external input to the art process because isolation is itself an external input that impacts the internal state of the artist.*

Rather than isolation being a lack of some sort of artistic input, I found that it was itself a form of input that acted as a medium for creativity. Isolation, by preventing forms of external input, creates a focus on an internal art practice. However, physical isolation does not prevent external input for the artist, and the means for isolation to be used as a medium depends on a person's individual personality and emotional situation. Martin chose to be physically isolated despite her ability to travel and live in a city such as New York. During Covid a person might not have a choice regarding physical isolation, but a person can choose to be intellectually and emotionally connected with others through modern technology even in the midst of physical isolation.

iv. AESTHETICS and AGENCY

Artists that were internally inspired or externally inspired both exerted agency during Covid to control the sensory input that ultimately translated into their artwork. This external input is observable as those artists who drew their inspiration internally during Covid still faced challenges in their artwork. Both types of artists worked both internally and externally. Those who started their work from an inner space found that inner space affected by the external. Those starting from an external space found an internal space through the process of creation. The effect of the external on the internal can be understood in the frame of aesthetics study as sensory perception affecting aesthetic judgement.[10]

Modern aesthetics has often been spoken of mainly in the discipline of art and design in the context of beauty and visual appeal. This is an over-simplification of the aesthetic, which is a judgement apparatus of not just beauty, but the full sensory experience. The conception of the aesthetic as purely connected to beauty stems from Kantian discourse on the aesthetic being misconstrued. The popularity of Kantian discourse on what is beautiful and its connection to art

has often overshadowed the conception of the aesthetic as a sensory experience. It is important to recall that Kant's extensive treatise on the beautiful and the sublime stems not from art, or even a desire to define the beautiful, but instead was built upon the concept of an aesthetic judgement, and what an aesthetic judgement entails. Kant framed this sensory experience, the aesthetic, as the judgment apparatus used to determine factors of like and dislike[27]. Kant was ultimately interested in what the purest, most objective, and empirical form of aesthetic judgement was and he examined this by exploring how decisions are made regarding what is beautiful and whether beauty can indeed be considered universal considering the subjective judgements made by man[28].

While Kant recognized that judgments are not logical and are entirely subjective, he postulated that these subjective judgements can be universal due to the common human faculties that will find inherent beauty within certain objects. This common sense is quite literally the sense that is common among humankind. This sense is not cognitive but is instead part of the sensory apparatus and function of being human[29]. While Kant spoke extensively on the different sorts of judgements that can be made, which can be considered pure, and what specific conditions must be met in order for this common sense to display a common appreciation for beauty, the core foundation of his arguments on aesthetics are not his resulting words on what is beautiful and what is sublime, but the process by which the beautiful can be recognized due to the unique sensory abilities that humans have that allows them to perceive the beautiful. This common sense is the arguably universal factor that allows beauty to appear objective. The question arises however, of just how common this common sense is.

This focus on universality, the common in Kantian's common sense, has led to criticism of aesthetics as a purely Eurocentric concept without cross cultural application. In debating the

relevance of aesthetics, Joanna Overing spoke of the aesthetic consciousness as a cultural phenomenon that developed within Europe due to lessened religious influence and the rise of the bourgeoise. To support this conclusion, Overing argued that aesthetic consciousness does not play a role in artistic production among different cultures such as the Piaroa of the Amazon[30]. This postulation necessitates a narrow definition of the aesthetic that draws purely on the conclusions made in Kant's treatise. What is often overlooked is that Kant is speaking of the sensory experience from a positionality in the authoritarian state of Germany[31]. Kant's interest in the universality of aesthetics was a result of the cultural context of his time-space orientation in Germany during a time of feudalist absolutism.

By contextualizing Kant's contribution to the aesthetic, I can broaden the definition of aesthetics beyond the beautiful and its subsequent attachment to the artworld. This allows for the aesthetic to refocus on its original conception as a framework of sensory experience. Eagleton eloquently defines the aesthetic as it exists within the frame of sensory experience.

> *The distinction which the term 'aesthetic' initially enforces… is not one between 'art' and 'life', but between the material and the immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, that which is bound up with our creaturely life as opposed to that which conducts some shadowy existence in the recesses of the mind.*[32]

This attempted separation between the "material and immaterial" is a nebulous concept which can be applied in a wide variety of ways. After all, how do I define what is material and what is immaterial, what is sensation and what is an idea, when the separation of these concurrent and intertwined concepts is difficult if not impossible? Nevertheless, aesthetics allows for these intertwined elements to be recognized, even if they cannot be resolved. Aesthetics, when understood as a judgement system made based on sensory experience, is widely applicable as a theoretical framework.

A judgement system based on sensory experience is impacted by what sensory experiences are. Returning to Kant's concept of common sense, and the not so common reality, Rancière reframes this concept by showing that common sense is rarely common because that which we sense is rarely the same. Aesthetics is a means of making sense of the sensible. What we sense depends on our time-space orientation. What is heard and what is not heard, what is seen and what is made invisible, the control imposed on sensory experiences, all lead to a distribution of that which is sensible. Sensory experience is distributed among the public through both controllable and uncontrollable factors. This is what Rancière, quite logically, titles the "distribution of the sensible"[33]. And this distribution can lead to a more poignant understanding of how differences of judgement and action occur. They are dependent on what is made visible, what is perceived, by the viewer.

This dependence on what is perceived means that the aesthetic cannot be separated from the political. The sensory experience is controlled by what is made sensible to the observer. The aesthetics of politics are multi-layered and their presence in democracy illustrates this. The utopian ideal of democracy would be that everyone could be heard, and everyone would then be seen. This occurs by deconstructing outdated models of power and allowing everyone a voice and vote. However, pre-established modes of power still exist which imposes a certain kind of distribution of the sensible. When those pre-established distributions are broken down the loss of control can make the resulting distribution more easily manipulated. There is a pre-established distribution, a re-distributing, and then a subsequent re-assembling of the sensible. These three modes of distribution are occurring simultaneously. It is this constant struggle, this interruption of the status quo, that Rancière refers to as politics. Democracy, with its efforts to create an equal

distribution of the sensible, may make this struggle more apparent, but these politics of aesthetics are present throughout society[34].

This struggle is something we are currently grappling with during Covid-19. The sensible is being re-distributed and re-assembled as restrictions on sensory experiences change. This disruption to the status quo is a phenomenon that is being mediated collaboratively and individually. Each personal experience contributes to what the community experiences. This dual conception can be considered within a Kantian context as the universal effects of subjectivity. While subjective decisions are determined by the sensory experiences of the individual and differ widely based on cultural setting, these individual sensory experiences may indicate trends. These trends may not be universal but can speak generally to the cultural aesthetic. Quarantine and the resulting lack of social interaction and aesthetic exposure have unique individual consequences. These aesthetic changes to life are widely applicable across our nation and the judgements based on those experiences are seen on a large scale.

Aesthetics provides a lens into social and cultural understanding through the examination of bodily experience. Aesthetics is intertwined with cultural determination and the state due to the complex nature of the body. Aesthetics is a contradictory concept due to the nature of the senses and the way in which sensory experience varies and is controlled by outside factors.

> *On the one hand, it figures as a genuinely emancipatory force - as a community of subjects now linked by sensuous impulse and fellow feeling…exemplifying new forms of autonomy and self-determination…On the other hand, the aesthetic signifies what Max Horkheimer has called a kind of 'internalised repression', inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony.*[35]

The aesthetic, whether it is fostering “social harmony” or imposing “social power”, defines the experience of the community through the sensory experience the individuals within that community are subject to. These contrasting elements of aesthetics are illustrated during the

current Covid-19 pandemic. We are currently experiencing subjugation of social power during quarantine due to rules regarding social engagement, such as group size and in-person gatherings, which are controlling our sensory experiences. At the same time, we are exemplifying new forms of self-determination by seeking and creating new sensory experiences online – itself defining a new social atmosphere. The aesthetic of America is changing.

Ellen exemplified this self-determination over sensory experience by seeking out and developing new sensory experiences online despite mandated physical isolation.

"John and I decided we need to go online and really reassure artists to just do their work and think about their work. I mean, there's so many other things we can't control. It's like this, like fricking out of control disease, politics. If you recall, you know, it's like craziness every morning. And it's like waking up in fear and worry every single day. And I thought, we need to remind artists to focus on their work. It's the one thing they can do. It's within their control because so many artists were saying, I can't get to the studio."

On her Facebook group (which had no geographical constraints), membership jumped to nearly four thousand members as artists supported each other during Covid. Ellen held weekly Facebook live meeting and posted questions for artists to respond to.

"Yeah, so one of the questions that I have posted on there is what are the top two or three things that you're struggling with? And I mean, people, fatigue and time to paint. I mean, it's amazing. 299 comments on that. Time, time, time, confidence, motivation, working bigger, uh, you know, relaxing my brushstroke, um, lack of inspiration, you know."

In addition to the community engagement that Ellen was doing, the Facebook page and Facebook live meetings, her and her partner John were working to establish a new business. Due to art classes being canceled during the pandemic, finances led Ellen and John to launch an

online art membership with art classes. They partnered with several artists they knew that were part of the encaustic art community to do this. Their Facebook page acted as a form of cultivation for this membership, which provided another form of community building with things such as weekly critiques, and a “Monday mashup” where they provided tips and tricks to their member participants.

Ellen didn’t stop online either. She rented out studios in the Chicago area so that she could hang a show during Covid.

"We have studios on the third floor and there are two rental galleries, very large, outside of our studios. And so I rented the studios and I, um, announced on our new Facebook page that I was going to be holding a, uh, art show. And I said, whoever submits something will get in because I didn't want, I mean, people already freaked out enough that they can't, you know, they're like, I can't even focus, you know? And I thought, I'm not going to send anyone a rejection letter during the pandemic, you know? And so, I said, it has to be 10 by 10 inches, works on paper in predominantly one color and I was going to hang them. And I did. The show already happened. I hung them.”

Ellen put in a lot of work and time, time that she didn’t have much of, to make this show happen, and she felt very positive about the response she received. The participation of other artists in this show illustrates how all of these different artists were asserting their own form of agency during Covid.

“I mean, it was an amazing show. In fact, you can look on Facebook, there's a Facebook page and I do a whole walkthrough of the exhibition. And we had over a hundred artists from 10 different countries participate. And people were so grateful. They thanked me profusely for doing this because it gave them something to look forward to. Cause you know, every single day

we were waking up and just, going with our former administration, what now, you know what melodrama is happening today. And, and people, it was hard enough being home without sitting there and watching all of that crap go on. So, I got such expressions of gratitude for doing that, that show. And it was a lot of work, but I took my time to hang it."

These expressions of gratitude are evidence of the beneficial impact of this community (and sensory) engagement on participants.

"I really feel like I've gotten to know people that I've never met before, because they've either been in my classes, they've been in the open forums, you know, we're interacting with them, just, you know, on Facebook live. And, um, they were in the art show, you know, I mean, I feel very warm and friendly for, towards these people and never have met them in person, you know? So that's just bizarre to think about it. It's like a new way of forming community," Ellen said.

Ellen's experience illustrates the ability of aesthetics to provide a space to articulate contradiction within culture. Ellen was both interacting with other people less during Covid, but also interacting more. She was being controlled by the social power being imposed on what she could do but was also exerting agency over her actions and developing social harmony within the artist community. Aesthetics provides a way in which to avoid over-reaching judgements about artists during Covid by contextualizing cultural decisions and apparent universal perceptions within the time-space which defines the unique sensory experience of the individual. There is a constant pull between the individual and the social, self-determination and hegemony, the distribution and the re-distribution of the sensible, which all frame conceptions regarding the contradictory aspects of human existence. Even Kant's original conception of aesthetic, as euro-centric as it is criticized for being, explores these same questions of articulating contradiction as

Kant examines how things can be both subjective and universal. Aesthetics, far from being relegated purely to the debate of fine art and what is beautiful, is an everyday experience, with everyday political and personal consequences.

Out of the six individuals I interviewed, Ellen was the most visually emotional as she spoke. She started crying as she told me that Covid had taught her "how important we all are to each other" when speaking of artists and the art community.

"I think artists, well, I know artists work in a solitary manner, you know, it's like, we struggle with our own creative expression, you know, and we try to get into shows and we try, you know, get feedback or take classes or give classes and things like that. But, I think we just realized how important being in community has been to getting through this because it's hard enough, you know, just doing your creative practice by yourself, you know, but, um, I think we've supported one another and inspired one another. And like I said, I think that that show gave people something to look forward to. You know, it really made them look towards the future. And that was my goal. I thought, this is, we cannot be stewing in this horrible, you know, drama of this maniac [referring to President Trump and political events] and, and this very scary health situation. You know, we can't. I didn't know what was going to happen with either situation, but I thought being, living in fear does not serve anyone's mental health or physical health, you know, and I was just trying to get people not to be afraid."

This effort that Ellen put in to help others not be afraid shows how isolation was overcome through the assertion of agency. Despite the physical isolation, personal connections were formed, and artists were able to support each other. One way that artists were able to support each other online was through their actual art practice.

“I mean, there was a friend of ours who we met in Ireland. She was teaching a-a painting class when John was there teaching a printmaking class. And, um, she's from the UK and every day during COVID at 9:00 AM sharp, central time, she would do a one-hour demo. Every day for free online. And I'm telling you that was my salve. You know, it was so w- I mean, if I did nothing else that day, or I, you know, couldn't get out of bed or do-, I mean, I would sit there, you know, I’d get up late, drink-drinking my coffee and watch Natalie paint in her garden, in the Cotswolds, you know? And it meant so much to me, you know, because no matter what else was going on, if John and I were fighting or, you know, stressed out about politics or anything else, um, that's how I started my day, you know, watching, watching this woman paint and I just, I appreciated it so much.”

Ellen was crying as she told me how much this woman and watching her paint meant to her.

Interviewing Ellen was an entirely different experience from any of the other artists I interviewed because Ellen had a very different experience during Covid. Ellen’s insights were less about her work, and more about the art community as a whole. Far from Covid breaking apart art community, Ellen fostered art community during the pandemic, and gained a new perspective on the significance it had both for her and as a whole. In this situation, aesthetics was less about art, and more about the personal benefits of online sensory experience in a community that just happened to be artists.

While the importance the art community had to Ellen was not universal among artists, each artist I spoke to was able to assert agency in areas that they did find important. Mary has a negative view on the artworld and the nepotism and “schmoozing” that happens there, but she

was also able to leverage the internet in order to be financially successful during Covid due to an increase in art commissions.

While physical isolation was unavoidable during Covid-19, isolation as a concept had an element of choice. Each artist had a different experience during Covid-19 due to underlying philosophy, material necessity, and personality. Due to technology artists had an opportunity to engage with the artist community and other forms of external motivation and inspiration for their artwork. Artists appear to have asserted agency during Covid-19 to utilize isolation as a tool or chose to overcome physical isolation by utilizing technological and physical resources available to them. Physical isolation may be used as a medium by which to control the external input that is ultimately expressed through artwork, but the use of this tool is a choice influenced by material realities.

Edith enjoyed the solitude she cultivated during isolation, and was artistically productive during the beginning of Covid, but ultimately decided to assert her agency to open herself up to externality. She gained a new appreciation for external sensory experience as she spent time working internally in solitude.

"It's a fine line I guess, everyone I talk to, whether it's artists or not, there's a balance in life that you have to find. And Covid clearly made that clear. Clearly made it clear. You can't um, you can't stay home all the time even if that's what I thought I wanted. You can't-you can't make art in a vacuum. You have to live life in order to make art. So um, so that's kind of where I am now. Still trying to find that balance all these years later. 50 to be exact." This "live life" and "you can't make art in a vacuum" indicate how sensory experience is essential to the ability to create art. Edith gained a new relationship with the external world of Covid despite, or because of, her internal process.

When Covid began, there may have been an initial period of uncertainty regarding usability of art or material concerns that outweighed motivation and feasibility of art practice during Covid-19, but these challenges were overcome. Karen, even though she initially felt like she needed to create art that was externally relevant to Covid, asserted her agency to utilize isolation as a tool. She chose to focus on her internal relationship with art and not worry about art spectators. Rebecca increased her sensory experience by turning to literature for motivation, and even spent time peering into the windows of closed galleries as she walked her dog down the street. Rebecca and Karen gained confidence in their identities as artists during the course of Covid.

Karen found that, "You know, I feel like I'm not as wavering sometimes," and that "the world has changed and now I'm still going to do art."

"I think it's showed me a - that I'm going to do this my whole life. Um part of me is like, if I can make it as an artist through Covid, and I've been lucky enough, I've made more sales this year than I've made – not this year but during the pandemic, than I've made at any point in my life. And-and part of that's just I have a really, really, supportive network. Um, a really awesome network, but part of me, is like, 'okay if I can do this through this craziness, this is like what I'm doing. I'm doing the right thing.'" Rebecca said.

By asserting agency over creative process artists were able to create a sense of control during a time when the world was crazy. "Um, but I just know the times that I would, you know, watch too much news and get pissed, um, about all the craziness going on. I thought I-I can, I can create, you know," Ellen said.

Each artist had a different experience during Covid-19 due to underlying philosophy, material necessity, and personality. Artists do much more than art and thus the way that their

motivation and inspiration for art practice was affected by isolation was individual based on history and the personal intricacies of their lives. However, ultimately, Covid and the resulting physical isolation was beneficial to art practice because it empowered artists to assert some level of agency over their aesthetic experiences and their own identities as artists.

IV. CONCLUSION

When I started this project, I expected to find artists struggling to find material to create. I likened isolation to a creative void and questioned whether artists could practice within such an atmosphere. Throughout the course of my research, I found that I was categorically incorrect. I was shocked to find that Covid-19 seemed to be good for artist finances and that there was improvement in artwork among the artists I was able to connect with.

Isolation is not a void. It is not a lack of things; it is its own thing. Isolation is itself an aesthetic experience that can be used as a medium for creation. The artists I spoke to took action during the course of Covid-19 to take control over their experiences. Pre-existing forms of motivation and inspiration may have changed for artists or may have been more heavily depended on during isolation. Some artists overcame isolation with technology or external resources like literature. Some artists embraced that isolation and fueled it into their internal art practice. That does not mean that isolation was good for them, nor does it mean that artists desire for that isolation to continue, but I found it deeply empowering to hear how agency was asserted during a situation where little was controllable.

“I think Covid’s been great for artists because it's made them focus and it gives them time to look at what they want to do as artists. I bet you they're more productive than any other time, unless they suffer from depression and loneliness. That can really put up a wedge in there,” Mary said.

Art may have taken a backburner for a while as grief and depression took a toll, but ultimately, I was deeply impressed by how the population I spoke with overcame these struggles. Overall, I believe that what I observed in artists and their relationship with artmaking illustrates just how powerful art is. I personally find this importance of the arts uncontestable whether I am framing it within a theoretical model of knowledge creation, in psychological case studies, or in the plethora of other texts and research projects that have been done.

As climate change continues and global pandemics such as Covid-19 become more likely to be continual occurrences, this historical moment may illustrate what is to come in the artworld as artists continue to practice in their own ways, with their own tools, within the auspices of their own lives.

As Rebecca put it, “So much as it seemed really horrible; I think the artworld will bounce. It’s bounced through every plague since the middle ages. I wanna know what the Renaissance is gonna look like.”

End Notes:

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8. Survey Questions:

On March 23rd, 2021 I posted a survey I created through surveymonkey on three different Facebook groups for artists in the Chicago area. I received 10 responses. I reposted this survey on April 28th and received 9 additional responses. In total I received 19 responses. The survey question were as follows.

1. How much time do you currently spend on art practice (per week)?: <1 , 1-5, 5-10, 10-20, 20-40, 40+
2. How much time did you spend on art practice prior to Covid (per week)?: <1 , 1-5, 5-10, 10-20, 20-40, 40+
3. Do you feel connected to the local art community ___?: Less than before Covid, More than before Covid, Same as before Covid
4. Do you feel that you can share your artwork____?: Less than before Covid, More than before Covid, Same as before Covid
5. Do you feel that your artwork is appreciated____?: Less than before Covid, More than before Covid, Same as before Covid
6. Do you feel that your art has ____?: Improved during Covid, Worsened during Covid, Stayed the same during Covid
7. Has Covid affected your art making process?: Yes, No
8. Has Covid affected your art subject matter?: Yes, No

9. Interview Questions:
    1. Can you describe your background in the arts?
    2. How did you interact with art before Covid?
    3. How has your interaction and engagement in art been impacted by Covid?
    4. How have you been feeling emotionally during Covid?

5. Since Covid began, have you experienced any challenges in your art practice? If so, what challenges?
6. Has your artistic process changed, and if so, how?
7. Has your engagement in the arts community changed, and if so, how?
8. In what ways has Covid changed the way you feel about art, if at all?
9. What, if any, benefits have you experienced from arts engagement during Covid?

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19. Ingold. Making p. 6.

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21. Appropriation is one of several ways in which power has been asserted through art. For more, reference the following: Joselit, David. *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020.

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