



INTERVIEWS

Goodbye to All That: Why Do Artists Reject the Art World?

Martin Herbert's latest book is a collection of essays about 10 artists who play with the system, struggle against it, or walk away altogether.

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Giovanni Garcia-Fenech | 21 hours ago



Martin Herbert's Tell Them I Said No (photo courtesy Sternberg Press)

In 2013, tired of receiving next to no recognition for my work, I decided, without any fanfare, to stop making art. Two years later, through no effort of my own, I was invited to exhibit in a group show at a popular young gallery. A few months later, a well-established gallery offered me a solo show. Miraculously, I found myself back in business. I went back into the studio. My new paintings garnered some positive reviews and a few sales. Then, work got difficult. Instead of providing an incentive, recognition paralyzed me. I felt a sense of political responsibility that I hadn't when I was just painting for myself. Today, a year after that show, I'm considering quitting again.

Perfect timing, then, to discover Martin Herbert's latest book, [*Tell Them I Said No*](#) (Sternberg Press, 2016), a collection of essays about "various artists who have withdrawn from the art world or adopted an antagonistic position toward its mechanisms."

Herbert writes sensitively and beautifully — he's an outstanding stylist — about the problematic relationship of artists to the art world. The 10 figures he profiles fall, roughly, into three categories: those who play with the system, those who struggle against it, and the ones who walked away in dissatisfaction.

The first group, all descendants of Marcel Duchamp, includes [David Hammons](#), who, among other things, has placed installations made of refuse in vacant lots in Harlem and sold snowballs on the street; [Stanley Brouwn](#), who, since 1972, has insisted that no images of his whimsical work or any biographical information be published; [Lutz Bacher](#) (a



Installation view, *David Hammons: Five Decades* at Mnuchin Gallery, March 15 – May 27, 2016 (photo by William Steinbauer/Hyperallergic)

pseudonym), whose mixed-media work spurns categorization, who refuses interviews, and whose gender wasn't even known for years; and [Trisha Donnelly](#), who has used rumor as part of her artwork, who forbids her gallery to write press releases, and who also refuses interviews (the title of the book is her response through her gallery to a request from Herbert).

The second group's relationship to the art world seems to be dictated in part by the artists' temperaments. [Agnes Martin](#) suffered from schizophrenia and moved to New Mexico just as her career started taking off. [Albert York](#) had difficulty speaking to people and was so tortured by the feeling that his paintings were inadequate, he often avoided exhibitions and sales. [Cady Noland](#) said she can no longer make art because tracking how her installation work is misrepresented takes up all her time. And the career of the nearly forgotten [Christopher D'Arcangelo](#) — who once had an exhibition in which he asked that his name be replaced by a blank space on publicity materials — only lasted four years before he committed suicide.

The third group simply found the art world insufficient. [Charlotte Posenenske](#) stopped making conceptual minimal sculpture to become a social worker, and [Laurie Parsons](#), mortified by the idea that people were buying her work, responded to an invitation for an exhibition in Germany by choosing instead to work at a psychiatric hospital and with developmentally challenged children.

I emailed Herbert, who is the associate editor of [ArtReview](#), to get further insight into these dropouts, contrarians, and tricksters — and, surreptitiously, to mull over my own uncertainty.

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Giovanni Garcia-Fenech: *You suggest that the art world, ironically, loves artists who buck against it. That certainly seems true for David Hammons, who's clearly very much in control of his situation, but in some of the other cases, as with Agnes Martin, Albert York, Cady Noland, and Christopher D'Arcangelo, it feels like their stance could be interpreted as borderline pathological. Do you think the admiration might stem from the old romantic idea of the "mad artist"?*

Martin Herbert: I wouldn't rule it out, though I'd hope not. Autonomy can manifest in subtler ways, too. Clearly psychological issues shaded Agnes Martin's retreat, but once she'd gone to the desert she was, to the extent that it was possible, in control of her situation, and certainly in interviews she emphasised the connection between how she lived and what she made. York was seriously introverted but also needed time, nature, and freedom from distraction to

make those paintings, and built those conditions for himself. For me — and this speaks also to Noland and D Arcangelo's cases — admiration for these artists has more to do with recognizing that they are/were embattled in their relation to the art world but also creating out of that embattlement, or refusing to create in a way that's as articulate as creating.



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Agnes Martin, *Mid Winter* (c. 1954), oil on canvas, 83.8 x 121.9 cm, Taos Municipal Schools Historic Art Collection, New Mexico (© 2015 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society, ARS, New York)

In terms of old romantic ideas, a variation of tortured artist might be part of the appeal, for some viewers. But I'd hope that what connects the figures I wrote about is this: Everyone I know thinks the art world as it's set up now, and as it has evolved over the last half-century, is a deeply flawed system, and these artists — diversely, sometimes at self-sacrificing

cost and sometimes to their benefit — highlight that fact or call it out. Whereas most of us develop our own variant on “oh well.” It’s possible that the idea of walking out of this world at all, where there’s an unspoken assumption that everyone engaged in cultural work is a de facto lifer, strikes some people as “mad.”

GGF: *Considering the problematic relationship some of the older artists you profiled had/have with the art world, such as Stanley Brouwn, one of the inevitable questions is: how did they manage to have any careers at all? Was this possible because the art world functioned so differently in the 1960s and ’70s?*

MH: Yes, I think that’s part of it. It’s also the case that nobody *begins* with a withdrawal, or without somehow “earning” the right to leave. (There’s a parenthetical in the book about “the forbearance of galleries” in this regard that would probably take another essay to unpack.) Brouwn began making art in the late ’50s, and it wasn’t until the early ’70s, after which point he’d appeared on TV, that he was done with interviews, photographs, contributions to catalogues, etc. Plus, his self-displacement seems inextricable from the conceptual nature of his art, which has much to do with generating large, ideational spaces for the viewer to inhabit, and in the ’60s it was congruent with historical notions of dematerialization. Hammons, too — whose attitude to showing up also conflates with his work — was more “present” in the early part of his career, though he’s noted that in the ’70s Los Angeles art milieu he formatively operated in, exhibiting regularly was considered vulgar. Which is as far as you can get from, say, galleries encouraging their artists to use Instagram, to

overproduce for fairs, to do the multi-tasking and audience-facing that, outwardly, attends the role today.

GGF: *When you look at artists who hit their stride in the 1980s and after, their relationship with the art world seems more complicated, and they consciously include it as a layer in their work I m thinking Hammons or Lutz Bacher or stop producing new work, like Noland. Do you think today s art world, which revolves so much around fame and wealth, precludes the more ephemeral practices of previous decades?*



Trisha Donnelly, *Untitled (T)* (2007), long-needle white pine and pay leaves, collection Debra and Dennis Scholl (photo by [Libby Rosof/Flickr](#))

MH: The youngest artist I wrote about is Trisha Donnelly (b. 1974), who seems to be making a good fist of being both here and not here, and who has been progressively, rewardingly elusive over the last decade and a half. She doesn t court the publicity machine anymore, even to the point of sanctioning press crib notes; she appears quite interested in rumour as an artistic medium. I m not

completely sure what you mean by ephemeral in this context, but I feel like Donnelly s work, though material, is

ephemeral in that it involves arrangements of sculptures, images, photographs, sound, etc., that you need to be there to see, and that don't have a functional secondary life on the internet. In staging an experience, she seems to have recognized that there are certain things an artist might not necessarily have to do and that the work could be stronger for it, and she's arrived at a place where that's permissible. Of course, one irony of this is that the fascination rests partly on scarcity value and exoticism. If most successful artists locked themselves in the studio and said next to nothing, the self-publicist would become cutting-edge — as has happened before.

GGF: *Of the artists you profile, the ones who carried the most resonance for me in the current political climate were Charlotte Posenenske and Laurie Parsons, who, decades apart, felt that art was not enough and moved on to do more concretely helpful things outside of the field. Would you say that they were precursors to the social practice of artists like Tania Bruguera or Theaster Gates, or were their cases about something else?*

MH: I'd say they were comparable in terms of what's at stake in the work — how art can propel genuine, measurable social change — although Posenenske and Parsons, and Bruguera and Gates, arrive at hugely different responses to the same conclusion: that art as contained within the exhibiting system is not enough. The art historian Christine Mehring has this great phrase about Posenenske, that she's the art world's "bad conscience." If you're aware of and moved by the implications of her stance, and Parsons's, the options are to quit also and do something that seems more vital; not do so and live with

the bad conscience; or, like Bruguera, Gates, et al, salve your sense of communitarian responsibility by resourcefully collapsing together art and social activism. To the extent that Posenenske and Parsons might be considered precursors, it could be both in their ambitions for a social art and as examples whose seeming defeatism – albeit a defeatism that is an indictment, a statement – asks to be creatively moved past: in light of their art, if you *don't* stop, what do you do?

That said, one thing I point out in the book is that Posenenske, at the end of her life, wanted to exhibit again. And if you look at Hammons now, he is making explicit moves towards visibility, perhaps heedful of how art history will view him. I don't think any of these issues around leaving or staying in the art world are clear-cut or fixed: they're wrestled with over the course of a life and modulated by circumstances. But better that than not wrestling at all.



Cady Noland, *This Piece Has No Title Yet* (1989) at the Rubell Collection (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Martin Herbert's Tell Them I Said No is published by [Sternberg Press](#) and available from [Amazon](#) and other online booksellers.