

Marisa Olson

ARTIST

I mean, questions like this always put me on edge a little bit because I often feel like, when people start talking about “That person is not really an artist.” or “That’s not really art.” sometimes they can-... well, as an artist, it puts you on edge and it also feels like there can be a kind of like either classism or there can be a feeling of that’s the kind of thing that sometimes program- I want to say programs children (laughs). You know, how all children are-... they start with this beautiful kind of creativity and then later they get told to almost like loose it. And then become, you know, doctors and lawyers and these other kinds of contributors to society, other than artists. And so, I worry sometimes about the “But is it art?” type of line of questioning. For me, I have a super open description of what constitutes art and what constitutes the identity of an artist. And for me, it is just that kind of creative identification. It’s just really someone who takes on that identification as a creative person. And of course, you get into, you know, the culinary arts and these other kinds of arts. And there are these hierarchical regimes that attach themselves to that, those discourses. But if you self-identify as an artist, then I think that’s fair. You can’t say that anyone – if you believe in a free society – you can’t really say that anyone should or shouldn’t be commenting about something, you know. And art may or may not move you in a particular direction, may or may not be successful in what it’s attempting to do or an artist’s message may or may not kind of compel you, or some artists may or may not feel that they have a particular message in their work or trying to sort of transmit this rhetorical function. But you can’t kind of dis-... viewers, curators, critics shouldn’t be telling artists and art – in my op-, you know, important opinion (laughs) shouldn’t be saying what people should or shouldn’t do in their art. I can say in my case because I make conceptual work, I often have a particular set of ideas, research questions even, thoughts in mind. But they are obviously important to me because I spend a lot of time and labor of various types – you know, physical, affective – working on them. But once I put the work out there, I can’t expect people to know exactly what I mean, to read my mind. I don’t believe in forcing a thesis statement down anyone’s throat, you know, literally like pasting a manifesto on the wall or beating them over the head or something super didactic. I think artists are lucky if people spend any amount of quality time with their work, coming up with any kind of interpretation, whether it’s right or wrong, you know. So, when it’s out there, it’s just kind of out there. I think these processes of interpretation can be fine-tuned or different in different media. And the internet- working on the internet has definitely been interesting for me in terms of communicating directly with people.

ARTWORK

It’s interesting to try to think about what is an artwork, especially if you do use this open definition of what is an artist. Because then the work of an artist can be anything that a creative person works at, you know. And if you think about that word “work” – is it the product of their labor, their physical, emotional labor? Is it the commodity? Does it have to be saleable? Can it be just something that they share? And certainly, when I first started working online in a performative context, I really didn’t think that that was ever going to be a factor (laughs). And it is for some more than others still now, but I don’t really think in those terms so much. For me, I’m also just really kind of interested in work that starts a discussion. A lot of times I have used the metaphor of, what in English we call “centerpieces” something that you put on the center of a table, to bring people to the table, to have a conversation. And that could be a work of art, a text, an exhibition, a class, a seminar, you know, a performance. Just something that is just about initiating a dialogue. And in particular, I find myself becoming more and more interested in ways to approach these, as I said previously, kind of research questions that deal with bringing together, you know, elements of popular culture that we all relate to but also the political, the social, things that are a bit deeper and more pressing and how to sort of address them on a social level. I also have a personal background in doing a lot of art therapy. I have since I was a child and even though it’s an art practice in a way, it was always like a very private, separate part of my life. It had to do with processing trauma, actually. But more and more over a few decades, that private part of my life and my public reality, I think, the social trauma of the world and my own practice all kind of converged. And it’s now coming out in my artwork. So, for instance, my most recent project is called “wellwellwell”.

I always loved things with-... where the language has multiple meanings. And so *wellwellwell* is supposed to sound a little bit like *world wide web*, but it's also a play on the wellness movement and how on the one hand the wellness movement is about real wellness, like your mental health, your physical health, your wellbeing, and on the other hand it's this like commodification of, you know, you-... it's like putting the word "organic" on something. You put the word "wellness" on cosmetics, a meditation app, anything like that and it becomes a bestseller, you know (laughs). And so, I created, what I call a "virtual guru character" online. And she is just starting to have this social media presence now. And she has a hashtag and she sort of talks to people about finding digital balance and using their creative resilience to be online and offline and reflect on these issues of how digital technology and the internet might stress you out but also give you new tools to relax, like meditation apps or like a virtual guru. And she also is very fond of art therapy and making watercolors when she is offline, to relax. And so, she- I just had a solo exhibition in Switzerland while on tour in Europe, of these watercolors as well as an installation of her relaxation videos and has been on kind of a motivational speaking tour, as well throughout Europe. So it's kind of like a hybrid... I don't even call her a character, I call her a *role*, like her *role* is to be this virtual guru, kind of- it's kind of this like speculative reality, almost like... she's closer to me in a certain way than any persona I've ever played. So, it's like, these people that you really trust, but you don't even know if they're real or something, but they're like your friends, you know (laughs).

PRODUCTION

I don't have a super regimented schedule like, I get up at the same time every day, I walk into the studio at this time and I leave at this time. And then a lot of it is just like what mood am I in, you know, getting up and feeling like surfing the internet versus being offline and doing my watercolors or having the space to set up more of a video shoot or something like that. And so then also, you know, a lot of times it's about working up to certain point at home and then finishing at the side of an exhibition or getting a residency to do something more ambitious. And that can be also a question of, you know, if I'm working on a computer versus working with physical materials or something like that.

I have done some collaborations before. The first one I ever did-... well, I did a couple of projects in a row with this artist Rick Silva. He used to use the name Abe Lincoln with a K, you might know his work. And those were awesome and actually, I didn't know until later that you can have collaborators that are not awesome (laughs) because I was just so spoiled by how awesome he was. Occasionally, I've tried to collaborate with other people, but it just depends like-... everyone has to be on the same page and in the right like mindset for it. I did something that was really fun a couple years ago with *Bruce High Quality Foundation University* called "centerpieces". During Miami Art Basel at this, this hypersalon that was organized by *TRANSFER Gallery*. And I just had people come and I talked about how being in Miami during the art fair is really kind of weird, like seeing all this art that is kind of expensive and so slick and you're an artist and you're feeling all this like anxiety of the market and everything. On the one hand you feel kind of inspired to-... like if you see something good than you're like "Oh, I want to- I want to make something right now." But also, you-... there is this pressure of like the finished product and stuff. And... I could just riff about that for a while, but anyway, I-... it was when I was starting to think more about the role of art therapy in my own life and just wanting to feel like it was okay to just be creative without some super commodified end goal in mind. And not be so attached to "This medium is *good* and this medium is *less good*, and this medium is *valuable*, and this medium is *less valuable*." And the idea of polish. So, I just brought all of these art supplies like almost preschool looking art supplies or something. And I thought I was going to have to give some big talk about what this was all about (laughs). And really all I did was like lay down a tarp on the floor and put the art supplies down. And people just went: *whoosh*. And they just went *crazy* and just started painting and like people were painting the paintbrushes, they were painting each other, they were just like so excited to just have free play, free form painting. And it was like everyone understood right away just having that freedom to play, without any rules. And so, that was really fun. So, I like doing things like that, I'd like to do more kind of open-ended things like that in the future.

MATERIAL

I use research a lot. I use pop culture a lot. And memory (laughs), nostalgia – which for so many people is a dirty word – but that ranges from nostalgia of the 80s and, you know, music and TV and movies to nostalgia of certain favorite animated gifs and a more fun moment on the internet than we’re having right now (laughs). I spend a lot of time, too much time, surfing the internet, but-... You know that animated gif that’s, you know, really popular right now, of the woman from the telenovela, sitting in the prison and she’s like doing math? The first time I saw that, I was like: “Oh, that is me surfing the internet!” It’s just like – I’m always kind of like connecting the dots between content and memes and conversations and-... It’s just, you know, it’s sort of like ridiculous (laughs), but it’s also just a certain way of, I don’t know “pro-surfing” we used to call it (laughs). Like a certain way, a certain high, a certain feeling of just enjoying, celebrating, critiquing; getting something out the internet. But like I said, it has really changed a lot, it has become very restricted, very hypercommodified. And, you know, everybody is always nostalgic for like *the better days* of, you know: “When I was a kid, the internet was way better!” you know.

I’m actually quite interested in materiality itself. So even though I use different material, I’m interested in materiality and the kind of specificity of different media. And even the-, the-... again, you know, I’m interested in language, like I’m interested in the concept of a medium and how it transmits ideas just through it being chosen in and of itself. Because I’m interested in the cultural history of technology, I’m interested in these objects in the room that your future viewers can’t see, like these cameras and microphones (laughs) and things that are recording me. And the ones that came before them and the ones that’ll come after them and then, where these things will go when they become obsolete. Like, will they go into a museum or will they go into dustbin (laughs)? And for a while, I was hoarding old things that people didn’t want anymore – old devices, phones, cameras, cassette players, whatever – and painting them gold and creating installations out of them. And I called them “time capsules”. Partly in reference to cultural objects that get buried. And partly because I felt like they were units of time in a way, they were kind of vessels of cultural moments that represented desires, fears and phantasies about the future, things that we wanted. There was-, there was a lot of desire built into the invention of those particular objects. And so, you know, for all of the discussion of an-... utopian phantasies around the “*immateriality of new media*”, I find it to be completely untrue. Even these ideas of the cloud and streaming. There is a lot of hardware behind it and just because it seems to be invisible to a lot of people, it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist; so I’m actually quite interested in that and in fact, I’m quite interested in that *phantasy* and where that comes from.

MEDIUM

I used to make this series of drawings called “monitor tracings” that were drawings on paper that I made doing Google image searches. And then pulling the image up on the screen and then tracing the image onto a piece of paper that I was holding up to screen. And again there-... you know, research, nostalgia, a question of memory, all these things were kind of baked into that. And the result was a drawing, you know, very faint drawing on a piece of paper. And that was the first art that I really called “post-internet”, in fact. And I also called it internet art even though it wasn’t exactly digital or networked. Drawing lines, drawing connections and plugging in to the conversation of internet art, that dialogue again – it’s sort of like a *centerpiece* – is part of what was important for me, as well as the performativity and the process of it which was a very thrilling part of it for me.

PROCESS

These questions are so funny cause in a way it’s sort of like “How do I know?” (laughs). “How do I know what art is?” I mean, process... it’s such a funny thing. I was critiquing this student’s work yesterday and she was actually really- I think a really talented sculptor. But there was this one little piece off to the side of her kind of architectural installation. And I was looking at it and I debated, you know, what I thought of it and what to say and I said: “You know...,” came back to it and I was like: “There is just this one part, it feels like maybe you didn’t need it.” And I was asking myself whether I should really say that, or whether like, who am I to say that. I mean I’m there to critique her work, but it’s her work. And she was like: “Yeah,” she said “I was making it and

then it just felt like there was something missing, so I put it in there.” And I was like: “Yeah, I know. That’s the feeling I had.” It sort of felt like one of those things where you’re looking at a painting and then you’re like: “I don’t know if this painting is done or not, and so I’m just going to put a little extra dot up in the corner.” And she was like: “Yeah, it was like that!” And I thought to myself- I was like: “Cool, so I’m learning more about how to read peoples work.” And then I was like: “I should know how to read peoples work, I’m an artist, I’ve taught art for many years, I get paid to talk about art.” (laughs) But then I’m like- you always feel like an imposture. Everyone always feels like an imposture talking about art, even talking about their own art, you know. And so, process... it’s just one of those funny things. Even with the show that I just had in Switzerland – the curator was like one of the best curators I’ve ever collaborated with. She was really great at supporting my ideas, being organized, keeping me organized, being supportive but being a boss (laughs). And yeah, up until the last minute, like everything was super planned and super organized, but I still like brought watercolors and paper with me (laughs) to this studio that I stayed in a week before the show opened. And I was like: “I think I’m gonna make some more watercolors (laughs). Just gonna sit here and make some more work and see if we should include it in the show.” And she was like: “That’s cool.” you know (laughs). And she could have been like: “No, that’s so disorganized!” you know. But it’s just like – “Is it done? I don’t know.” – you know, and you just keep like thinking about it.

A lot of times for me, it can really often start with wordplay. It’s really funny, I mean... I know I keep bringing up language and these kind of wordplay things. I- My dad was a cryptographer, fluent in nine languages and he... and growing up in our house, he was always saying cheesy puns. And *now* I’m so thankful that he gave me this love of language. I always loved writing. I feel like I was almost a writer before I was a visual artist. And I still write a lot. I don’t- I think, last time I looked, I have like seven hundred and one note files on my phone. And a lot of it starts with notes – weird little like wordplay ideas or something that I’m thinking about. And it- and then it becomes a way to explore that idea. And then-... I mean, not always. A watercolor doesn’t start as like: “Let me think about wellness in a watercolor” you know. And that’s actually one thing that is super frustratingly hard and meditatively relaxing for me at the same time because I have to let go in the watercolors (laughs).

A lot of times it’s like- it’s the words, it’s like what if I auditioned for *American Idol*? You know, it’s that *idea*. And then it becomes the project, you know. Or it’s like this other thing I’m gonna be doing in the future. It’s like me as a woman in the future, preparing for my first retrospective at age ninety (laughs). It’s like a statement, you know. It’s like a proposition. And then, I start thinking about what it would look like. So maybe this is a good way to explain “process” cause I’m thinking about something in the future. And then it’s like, well there would be catalogue. So what would the catalogue have? And then that becomes a structuring mechanism. And then it’s like, well there could be photographs of me working in my studio or studios and there would be this documentation of how when I was around forty or so, I had a big change in my work and had this autobiographical shift and started addressing the role of art therapy in my work – which is true (laughs). And just documenting this kind of evolution in my practice. And- But maybe the photos would be black and white because then they have that archival, historical feel. And just kind of like speculating and fleshing out, you know, what this would look like. And then it’s-... it almost does become like the documentation of an idea (laughs).

PRESENTATION

So I like to be able to present my work in galleries, museums – what people like to call *offline space* (laughs) – as well as online. And I- I like to be able to sometimes use social media to draw out, you know, more of a story, almost like a narrative, you know. I think that, you know, there is this kind of interesting phenomenon – if you can call it that – where people often just don’t go see shows anymore (laughs). They expect it to be online right now. And the truth is, if you look at all the people in the world, you just- there are only so many people who can go to a gallery space in a certain city for the duration of that show, and so it is really nice to think about archival strategies, not just putting it online but archiving it in a special way and making it accessible to people. And then, when you- you try to use the social media in the way that I was talking about, you can try to sort of push it out in a way that just reminds people with short attention spans or who only drop in and out of the internet, you know,

periodically that- “Here is the show. This is what it’s about. These are some of the research questions” as I said etc.

Yeah, I mean I think that you can try to maybe extract multiple viewpoints from the show, like a hologram, you know (laughs). And then, instead of just having like the one main image for a show you can have this hologram perspective, you know, this lenticular perspective – not hologram – on the show. If you had like one catchphrase, I know exhibitions don’t have catchphrases per se, but like imagine if, you know, a product has like one catchphrase, then you can actually have multiple statements about a show or an idea that you’re sort of putting out there. I’m not saying I’m like a master of social media, but it’s something I’m actually kind of trained to teach and remind myself to do. And I think that this is something I’ve been trying to think about, exploring with the *wellwellwell* project, for instance, like that- In that way also I can try to pull in other references as well that are like things that I find on the internet, or photos that I take in world that relate to my project. I can give them the same hashtag and kind of draw them into the narrative, you know. And it’s not just about like sharing one exhibition photo and a date, but it’s about kind of weaving things together.

INTENTION

I am making art work because I believe that it does have a certain power to connect people, to evoke emotion, to create a connection that can lead to social, political... change. It can also be fun, romantic, pleasurable, celebratory. I don’t think those things have to be totally separate either. I- and I love beauty, you know, I think it can be beautiful as well as all these other things. I also- like I find that sometimes I get some of the greatest joy as an artist watching children look at my work (laughs). Like they’re not as programmed to be so judgmental and looking at art as other people- I mean they- they actually can be really judgmental in a certain way (laughs), but it’s not this like programmed aesthetic judgement, it’s just like pure human response. And so, I feel like when kids like my work, it’s like the *best* compliment (laughs). And so I feel like, I’m sort of making art for everyone or for anyone. And I-, you know, I’ll be lying if I didn’t say I was making art for myself, too (laughs). It’s-, its also just different, you know, with every project, what- what the question is or what the sort of issue is. I think I’m really just focused on positivity right now and in the idea that you can be and *should* be critical, but that you can still be positive and that there is a power in positivity. And, you know (laughs) like it’s just- can be cheesy but like self-love is okay and loving your neighbor, and things like this, are old-fashioned messages, but they have important meaning (laughs). I would say that hasn’t always been the core message of my work, but if you’re asking me this afternoon, like what is the most important thing I would want to transmit out there to someone watching a video if I just had like one message to share (laughs), it would just be like: be nice (laughs). But yeah, it’s like even with the *wellwellwell* video, I’m always sort of saying like, you know, we hear that we should- we *need* to meditate, we *need* to breathe, we *need* to get offline, but like, don’t be so hard on yourself (laughs), you know. There is a lot of pressure right now to like *be* a better person and *be* a better activist (laughs), *be* more ethical – be this, be that. And it’s like, even in the messages about being better, there is a kind of like intense scrutiny. And... that’s challenging.

METHOD

There is often just something that is like... this subtle idea that is one of seven hundred and one note files (laughs) and it just lingers around and then- it’s kind of like in psycho-analysis, like Freud would probably say something has to cathect – it’s like when you have this unconscious desire, it has to move from the unconscious to the preconscious and then kind of like *pop* out (laughs), you know.

I mean, I work in lot of different media and, you know – watercolor, internet, sculpture, video, performance, installation. A lot of times, it is almost like I’m running a research lab. And I’m just kind of- I have these research questions like: What is the cultural history of technology? What is the relationship between pop culture and politics? What, you know, what does it mean to talk about experiences of gender instead of like questions of gender or-? Things like this. And then for each question or subquestion I just sort of ask myself like what is the most suitable or interesting material that I can use at this time, for this experiment, to ca- sort of carry this out in my little lab (laughs).

ART

My art is experimental (laughs). I mean, I think my art is kind of-... it's an experiment in communication, it's a coping mechanism in the world. It's-... Communication is a big thing for me. Language as well as just trying to connect with other people and see how they're feeling about certain things, say how I'm feeling about certain things, see where we connect on that. And experiment with fine-tuning different- like the differences between communicating in a sculpture versus a website versus a poem versus a performance. And how it feels to do that, to me and to an audience.

When I interpret art, I think, I tend to look at it that way. What does this work communicate? You know, I- sometimes I say, what is this artist communicating? But you can't always access the artist-, you don't know who the artist is, you don't- I mean, who they really are (laughs). And so, you just have to approach the work at f- you know, somewhat face value and yeah, I look at it as a kind of, you know, a speech act in a sense. – What is it communicating and how? What rhetorical devices is it using? You know – use the super basic example of a painting. What- Everything, from the size, the medium, color choice, the gestures of the marks, you know, the content (laughs), the subject of the painting itself obviously, the style etc., they're all, you know, rhetorical devices, I think... that not only communicate *something* but communicate in some way. And so, yeah, that's how I kind of tend to interpret work. And I guess, I would interpret my own work in the same way (laughs), but then sometimes it's painting, by those same standards, sometimes it's sculpture, again, performance, internet, video sound, – probably to many things (laughs). Confuses people. But yeah, it's communication and experiments and communicating.

BIO *

Marisa Olson's work combines performance, video/new media, painting/drawing, and installation to address the cultural histories of technology and wellness, experiences of gender, and the politics of participation within pop culture. Her work has been presented by the Whitney Museum, New Museum, Venice Biennale, Fotomuseum Winterthur, C/O Berlin, National Museum of Contemporary Art-Athens, Tate Modern + Liverpool, British Film Institute, PS122, Performa Biennial, Samek Museum, Bard CCS, and she is also a founding member of the Nasty Nets internet surf club who showed at the Sundance Film Festival, New York Underground Film Festival, and elsewhere. Her work has been written about in the New York Times, Interview, Frieze, Art in America, Art21, Folha de Sao Paulo, Liberation-Paris, Le Monde, the Wall Street Journal, the Globe and Mail, Dis, Dazed, and her own critical writing has appeared in Artforum, e-flux, Aperture, Flash Art, Art Review, Afterimage, The Guardian, Wired, Surface, and numerous books in multiple languages. She is the former Editor & Curator of Rhizome, and the former Associate Director of SF Camerawork; has curated projects at the New Museum, Guggenheim, SFMOMA, White Columns, and Artists Space; and served on Advisory Boards for Ars Electronica, Transmediale, ISEA, Creative Capital, the Getty Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Kennedy Center, and Tribeca Film Festival. She was Artist-in-Residence at Eyebeam, Master Artist in Residence at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, and has been a Visiting Artist at Yale, Brown, VCU, SAIC, Oberlin, and elsewhere in addition to serving on the faculty at RISD and NYU. Olson studied Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, History of Consciousness at UC Santa Cruz, and Rhetoric at UC Berkeley. She was born in Germany and lives in New York.

Credits:

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