



## How Do We Go On?

Julian Charrière :  
*And Beneath It All  
Flows Liquid Fire*,  
2019, color film, aspect  
ratio 16:9, video loop  
with stereo sound. Photo:  
Jens Ziehe. Courtesy:  
Dittrich & Schlechtriem,  
Berlin

Are we at a loss in view of the pandemic? Or are we being well advised? Visual art, especially when successful, has quite often set the tone. It has frequently been visionary as well. In 1961, in express homage to the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, Yves Klein wanted to paint the whole earth a color he had patented, International Klein Blue. Viewed from the spaceship *Vostok 1*, the earth had indeed, for the first time in history, looked blue. Not long after, the German *Zero*-artists thought of covering oceans with mirror foil or, like Otto Piene, conceived of exploding atom bombs in the air for the fun of it. **There were to be no more limits, everything was to be cheerful and bright.** As if to counterbalance these impulses, Walter De Maria worked on the idea of digging long channels into three continents at the time of the first moon landing in order to photograph them from an *Apollo* space capsule, showing them superimposed in the form of a cross in a rectangle. The aim of his “Three Continents Project” was contemplation—a turning inward, as against gestures of megalomania. De Maria had come to doubt whether space travel could really lead humanity to grapple with the challenges of living on the earth. He sensed that constant expansion and growth could also have destructive effects. In 1968 he applied the widely used, aggressively radiant orange of construction machinery to a large-format, monochromatic painting titled “The Color Men Choose When They Attack the Earth.” **Years later, in 2013, the very young Swiss artist Julian Charrière climbed an iceberg in the vicinity of Iceland in order to “melt down” the colossus with a little blowtorch.** In 2019 Charrière, in collaboration with Julius von Bismarck, distributed a video that simulated the demolition of the famous stone arch in Utah’s National Park. The vandalism was staged. The intention was to stir perplexity and indignation in viewers who came across the video through various media in the worldwide web: fake news against fake news. The tide has turned 180 degrees in the field of art. The Korean artist Anicka Yi chose “The Art and Science of Bacteria” as her subject in order to point to “patriarchal fear” of the female body’s odors. Our Western society, she said, is excessively preoccupied with cleanliness. **Many artists are greatly concerned about collective expressions of human conduct and their effect on climate change, the inequities of human giving and taking, abuse of the female body, lack of diversity, and racism.** The museums are responsive to this change.

In 2019 the *British Museum* called for “Diversity in Museum Practice.” Since the summer of 2020 the *Smithsonian Museum* in Washington, DC has been waiting for a government resolution to provide an optimal museum presentation of the history of the roughly 60 Million Latinos living in the United States. The *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* is preparing a “diversity plan” for the year 2020 and has sold a Mark Rothko painting for 50.1 Million dollars in order to finance new acquisitions of underrepresented artists. Garry Garrels, the museum’s chief curator for the last nineteen years, was forced to resign in July 2020 after loud protests following his statement that he would continue to acquire art by white men because he was opposed to “reverse discrimination.” **More than ever and more intensely than ever, a struggle for equality is being waged in the field of art. Women are demanding the opportunity to succeed as warriors, queens, and poets.**

The discourse underlying these ideas has been reinforced by the fact that, since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been massive layoffs in almost all American museums and galleries, with particularly stressful effects on lower income groups and, again, people of color. They are fighting back more than ever, with the result that their art and the art of women is inevitably advancing to the forefront. Meanwhile in Europe, especially in Germany, the ethics of cultural exchange with China are also being discussed. German provenance research has implacably determined that Peter Ludwig and many other collectors have bought forged works by alleged Suprematists in well-known galleries for years. **The pandemic is bringing a great deal of truth to light.** If the daily news is any guide to the course of events, no stone is going to be left unturned. But let us remember that Ad Reinhardt, the abstract painter who died in 1967, repeated apodictically in many of his texts: “Art is art. Everything else is everything else.” The truth is very important. Art very often exceeds it by a considerable margin.

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