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The Avant-Garde Is Over. Should Artists Embrace Being Fashionably Late?

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October 21, 2025 5:00am



View of Michael Wang's installation *Extinct in New York* at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Art Center on Governors Island, New York, 2019.

From Top: Photo Michael Wang; Photo Joel Saget/AFP Via Getty

Many canonical 20th-century artworks are considered important in part because they were ahead of their time, from Marcel Duchamp's readymades to Andy Warhol's screen prints. Marshall McLuhan's midcentury assertion—that art functions as a “Distant Early Warning system ... tell[ing] the old culture what is beginning to happen to it”—encapsulates a common belief about art's prognostic value. But the time when traditional artistic media could tell us about the future may be mostly in the past.

While art can still serve a vanguard function in the early 21st century, the mainstream culture's rate of change has accelerated dramatically; on social media and in the news, hordes of people are busy reporting its every move. Keeping up with the present—let alone getting ahead of it—has become harder than ever, and any forward-looking artworks today will necessarily look different from those of the past.

My hunch is that the contemporary artworks likeliest to one day appear prescient, albeit not always in reassuring ways, will come from para-artistic digital practices, whether artistic experiments with AI; so-called Red Chip art (which Annie Armstrong of *Artnet News* defines as works with flashy aesthetics that abjure art history); or folk forms such as NFTs, memes, or TikTok lore videos. What these practices have in common is not just that they're relatively new, with strong ties to digital culture, but also that they're only somewhat recognizable as great art, or even art at all, under our inherited value systems. Traditionalists gasp, often justifiably, at the ethical and aesthetic challenges AI art poses, or at Red Chip art's tawdriness, or at digital folk art's simplicity. But such practices are telling the old culture what's happening to it, even if the message isn't what most fine arts audiences want to hear.

What about all the painting, sculpture, photography, video, and performance that people still love to make and see? They're not going away, but it's become harder to create fine art in those media while remaining on cultural discourse's cutting edge. In her 2024 book *Disordered Attention*, Claire Bishop observes that contemporary artworks “tend to be symptomatic of larger conditions, rather than anticipatory fortune tellers,” because “the world changes faster and more cruelly than even artists can grasp.” Cycles of ideation, fabrication, and curation move far more slowly than online discourse, which explains, as do the Covid lockdowns and the precarious economics of art-making, why a number of very online artists like Artie Vierkant, Joshua Citarella, and Brad Troemel pivoted from art-making proper in

the 2010s to art-adjacent content creation in the 2020s. Some artists, galleries, and museums still try to set or chase trends, and some small fraction of that work may one day prove to have been ahead of its time. But pursuing prognostic artistic relevance seems a fool's errand when the cultural conversation evolves so rapidly. Museums in particular are entering a horse-and-buggy into a NASCAR race.

Artists and curators might be wise, then, to embrace their inevitable belatedness. The story that culture workers tell about visual art's prescience contributes to the field's romance in order to justify our purpose beyond superficial pleasures. Today, when it's harder than ever for art to function as a leading indicator, it's worth examining how some art functions as a lagging indicator—showing audiences not where culture is headed but where it's been.

Edward Burtynsky: *Mines #13, Inco-Abandoned Mine Shaft, Crean Hill Mine, Sudbury, Ontario*, 1984.

Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York/©Edward Burtynsky

ART-AS-LAGGING-INDICATOR may sound less glamorous than avant-garde prognostication, but it has its advantages, helping audiences process cultural changes that might be difficult to accept, or even keep up with. This effective lag is perhaps most pronounced in recent art about climate change. Unlike the earliest

1960s and '70s experiments in eco art, undertaken when scientific and popular understanding of anthropogenic climate change was still emergent, contemporary climate art serves no vanguard consciousness-raising purpose. The best recent eco work tries to do something else: render tangible phenomena that are hard to wrap one's head around.

Take Edward Burtynsky's dazzling aerial photographs of landscapes scarred by human industry, on view in his retrospective "The Great Acceleration" at the International Center of Photography. His images of polluted waterways, terraformed mines, and tracts of waste are disorienting in scale; they elicit the thrill of looking out an airplane window and seeing the earth as an alien jigsaw of color and texture. The landscapes portray dramatic anthropogenic alterations to the planet that typically remain out-of-sight and out-of-mind; their aesthetic wonder intensifies the viewer's dread at witnessing not just our species' collateral ecological damage but also our estrangement from it. The artworks speak the language of both facts and feelings, depicting things we know, at least in the abstract, but with a visual oomph that makes them palpable.

Many recent eco-minded artworks also use a temporal lag to create an emotional charge. Athena LaTocha's gargantuan *In the Wake of...* (2021) incorporated shellac, earth from Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery, demolition debris, and lead casts of rock outcroppings in a 55-foot-long abstraction recalling a geological formation. Its blend of natural and construction materials situates the traces of contemporary urban development within deep time, suggesting our species' inability to stave off its oblivion in the long run. Michael Wang's clever *Extinct in New York* (2019) showcased plants that once grew wild in New York City but no longer do. The living plants displayed in the Arts Center at Governors Island sat in greenhouses that, despite being sealed shut, appeared discordantly bright and airy, resembling an assisted living facility.

Climate artworks like these portray the past in order to help audiences negotiate uncomfortable binds in the present. They show us the fraught path that got the planet into its current state without explicitly proposing a future—perhaps because it feels too late to effect change on the necessary scale, or perhaps because so much 20th-century utopianism now appears to have failed. When climate art does depict the future, it often imagines that future based on what's likely to be lost: artworks as anticipatory elegies rather than cutting-edge predictions.

View of Olafur Eliasson's project *Ice Watch*, displayed in front of the Pantheon in Paris during the World Climate Change Conference in 2015.

From Top: Photo Michael Wang; Photo Joel Saget/AFP Via Getty

Olafur Eliasson's "Ice Watch" (2014–19) series is paradigmatic in this respect. Realized first in Copenhagen, then Paris, then London, the installations comprised immense ice blocks (weighing more than 80 tons total per installation) sited in public plazas; the melting blocks' dwindling, misshapen forms served as over-obvious reminders of the dwindling time left to mitigate anthropogenic climate change. Yet the installations, needlessly repeated as if to compensate for the gesture's futility, were more effective as epistemological allegories than environmentalist ones. Eliasson wanted to confront civilization with uncanny harbingers of its dissolution, in hopes the ice blocks could be smelling salts; they instead confronted visitors with their repressed climate fatalism. The most telling photos of the series are close-ups in which pedestrians hug and kiss the ice, as if bidding a deathbed farewell. These tender moments dramatize what happens when understanding climate change intellectually gives way to the emotional impact of witnessing its tangible effects.

Most people experience climate change in an estranged way that visual art is adept at undercutting: Art can convey embodied knowledge even when viewers aren't permitted to touch the work. Maya Lin's *Ghost Forest* (2021) subtly demonstrated this principle. The artist installed 49 bare cedar trees that saltwater inundation had displaced from their original site throughout the central lawn of New York City's

busy Madison Square Park. Like Eliasson's ice hunks, Lin's trees stood as metonyms of worsening environmental loss. But the quotidian park-going activities that continued alongside Lin's apocalyptic symbols suggested how easily people adjust their baseline sense of normalcy. We already live amid such loss, even if it sometimes takes art to remember the fact.

Maya Lin: *Ghost Forest*, 2021, in Madison Square Park, New York.

Photo Andy Romer/Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York

WHILE ARTISTS LIKE LIN AND WANG play with art's always-already-too-lateness, other artists turn to para-artistic forms in order to prognosticate. Before it disbanded in 2016, K-Hole (Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Chris Sherron, Emily Segal, and Dena Yago) monitored cultural hype cycles as doctors do patients in intensive care. "In Los Angeles, you're always late," begins one section of *K-Hole #5: A Report on Doubt* (2015), the fifth and final publication by the trend-forecasting art group. "You wake up to hundreds of unread emails, 70 unread texts from group chats." That hamster wheel feeling of never quite being able to catch up may have a particular tang on West Coast mornings, but it's familiar most everywhere by now.

K-Hole's annual reports, available for free as PDFs, took the form of ad agencies' internally circulated consumer forecasting reports; the PDFs' fashion-inspired imagery and breezy intellectual tone verges, at moments, on parody, but ultimately comes across as sincere. The conceit—trend forecasting for aesthetic rather than commercial purposes—was ahead of its time but doesn't resemble what most

people, then or now, think of as visual art. Its hermit crab inhabitation of an otherwise staid corporate form, the group slideshow presentation, as well as its dissemination through both traditional gallery exhibitions and nontraditional digital means, hasn't been metabolized into the institutional fine arts ecosystem. Instead, that style of work has resurfaced as monetizable digital content such as artist-turned-content-creator Brad Troemel's cultural reports, available to Patreon subscribers as slideshow video essays.

K-Hole's reports predict the future by drawing from the recent past, extrapolating from significant cultural developments so as to surmise their emergent implications. The subtitle of their first report, *K-Hole #1: FragMOREtation* (2011), derives from a 2010 Daffy's subway advertising campaign. In that same report, they discuss Venmo, which at the time was novel enough that the now ubiquitous app required explanation. Whereas many climate artworks lean in to their own belatedness, K-Hole's reports try to minimize theirs. The group's crystal ball method was to follow trends so closely and holistically that they could be among the first to clock when and why the vibes were shifting.

Some contemporary artworks will continue to anticipate vibe shifts on purpose, and others will continue to be prescient by accident. Yet most traditional artistic media and methods of dissemination can't keep up with the shifts' rapidity and the culture's attunement to them. K-Hole presaged this dynamic and was in part a victim of its own success, as reading the cultural tea leaves for new microtrends became a common pastime across mainstream news and social media, obviating the collective. For artists unconcerned with timeliness, oriented instead toward the deep past or some supra-human future, the cultural demand for immediacy poses less of a problem. But for artists oriented toward the here and now, it might be freeing to embrace being fashionably late.

