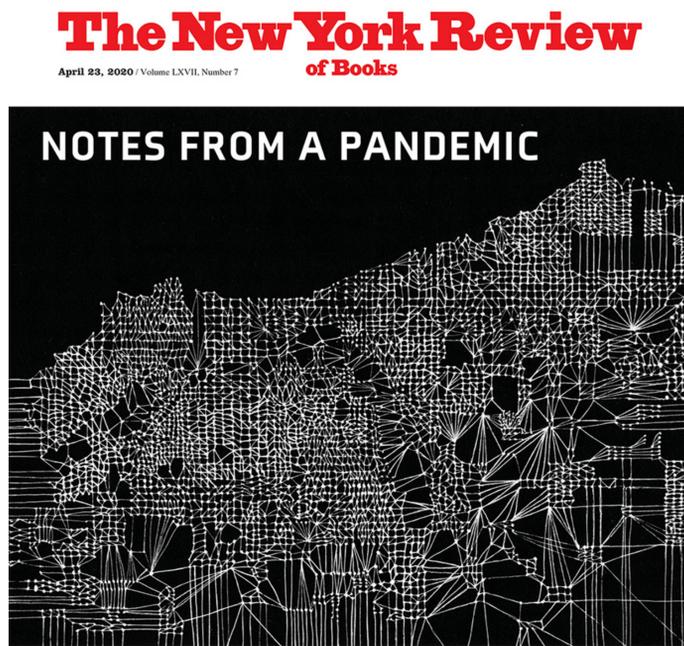


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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When the *New York Review of Books* was seeking an image for the cover of the April 23rd issue bearing the title “Notes from a Pandemic,” the editors chose Victoria Burge’s print *Chicago* from 2010.



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The reason seemed obvious: Burge’s work—developed from an oblique visual source that was, in fact, a map of the Windy City—showed a multitude of dots that were connected to each other by horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines at a variety of angles. The artist describes the creation of this work as “marking the location of streets within the city of Chicago using the graphics of an early-20th century map. Adding connecting lines and subtracting the original cartographic information built a web of invented pathways; an architectural network of possible trajectories.”

The *New York Review*’s “pandemic issue” offered a new lens through which to view this work. Rather than a constellation of abstracted city streets, her map-based drawing now evoked a data visualization of the spreading Coronavirus.

Yet not everybody agreed with what could be seen as instrumentalization of Burge’s art. After the issue was released, the artist received a message through her website from an architect, unfamiliar with Burge’s work, who wrote: “I find it striking that the NYRB used your work from 2010. Do you understand the connection and the arguments for this choice? Do you find this contextualization of this body of work misleading or does it open up a perception that you find interesting?”

The artist’s short answer to those questions would probably have been “yes.” In a longer response, she explains: “Although I was not thinking of a global pandemic when I created *Chicago*, a drawing (and subsequent print edition) in 2009–10, I was thinking of structural networks, systems of information, and patterns of connectivity. I welcomed, and was intrigued by, the request of the NYRB to use the image for their cover. It offered the work continued relevance within a new context.”

What is touched upon here is, of course, the more fundamental question of the readability of abstract art. To what degree is the interpretation of a work of art determined by the circumstances under which it is seen as well as by the beholder’s frame of reference? To what extent are we as viewers allowed to bring our own experiences to the work? Throwing our own expectations like webs over the work to make it intelligible for us means, in essence, to re-enact Nietzsche’s description of our relationship with the real world: “We are like spiders in our webs ... whatever we may catch in them will be something that *our* webs are able to catch.” We see mainly, if not only, what we are prepared and conditioned to see. Or, as the art-historical adage goes: the art historian sees only what he knows.

The ubiquity of abstraction in the contemporary art world has evoked plenty of criticism and Jerry Saltz’s piece in *New York Magazine* from 2014, *Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?*, remains a worthy (and amusing) read.

Why new abstract paintings look the same

With this in mind, I find as little to object to the *NYRB*’s choice of image as did the artist. The very fact that Burge’s work *could* be used as a visual metaphor for the current pandemic attests to its inherent quality. Any abstract art capable of transcending its “decorativeness” needs therefore not to be afraid of being interpreted through a variety of different perspectives. Its integrity as a visual statement will be changed as little as, according to Nietzsche, the real world will ever be changed by those webs that we throw over it in our futile attempts to grasp it.

Victoria Burge @ C.G. Boerner

Victoria Burge

