

Roni Horn Shares a Timely Record of Solitude

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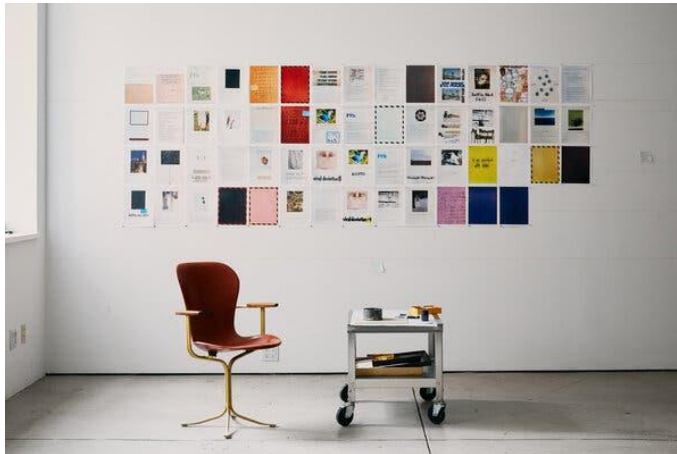
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The artist's latest work, for which she made an image nearly every day for almost 14 months, unexpectedly became a document of life at the start of a pandemic.



The artist Roni Horn photographed at her studio in New York City.

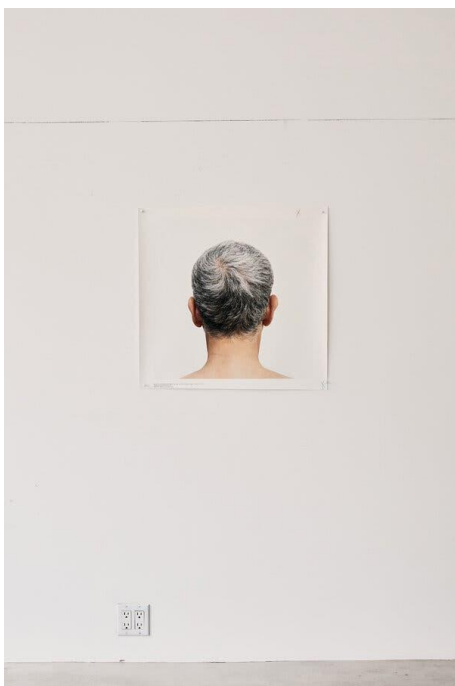
The artist Roni Horn has always been preoccupied with time: its effect on how we see a work of art, and how we see each other. Beginning in the 1980s, she has positioned pairs of identical sculptures at different locations in a gallery for her series "Pair Objects" (1980-present), which calls attention to the impossibility of experiencing the same thing twice. Photographs of her niece taken seconds apart show the mutations of the young girl's face as she mugs for the camera in "This is me, This is you" (1998-2000). And Horn's "Library of Water" (2007) captures time on a grand scale: Its grove of 24 ten-foot-high hollow glass columns installed in Stykkishólmur, Iceland, preserves samples of water from the country's glaciers that may outlive their source (one of the glaciers was already declared dead in 2014). But it wasn't until 2019 that Horn, 65, started to keep track of time in a way that's more familiar to the rest of us: "I like the word 'log' as opposed to 'diary' or 'journal,'" she said. "I'm not telling you what I'm doing every day. But when you add all of these bits together, you get my sensibility."



Horn and her studio assistant tested several different ways to display the artist's new work "LOG (March 22, 2019-May 17, 2020)" (2019-20). Each 8.5-by-11-inch sheet of paper captures a moment in time that the artist lived through.

Horn's sweeping, 40-year career has brought her work into the collections of the world's major museums and in 2009 landed her a retrospective that traveled from the Tate Modern in London to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. But for almost 14 months, she took on an intentionally modest, almost childishly simple task: making one work per day on a standard, 8.5-by-11-inch sheet of paper, only skipping a day here and there. Drawings, photos and snippets of text record travels to Zurich and Oslo, days spent sick in bed, and in one instance, what she ate for lunch (caption: "LUNCH TODAY"). But Horn also collected ephemera that interested her: quotes from the comedian Maria Bamford and from witnesses at a Siberian gulag; musings on black holes and the near-extinction of a species of macaw; photos of the Empire State Building as seen from her Fifth Avenue apartment and of the birches that grow around her studio in Austerlitz, N.Y.

Horn started the log on March 22, 2019. A year later, she was inadvertently creating an homage to Daniel Defoe's "A Journal of the Plague Year" (1722). An entry from April 17, 2020, lays out plans to watch an Audrey Hepburn movie as an "antidote to the tyranny of involuntary isolation." By May, her style lives somewhere between Henry David Thoreau's descriptions of Walden Pond and what Thoreau might have written of his stay in a Concord, Mass., jail: "The frogs are gone. Or in silent retreat. Or retreating silently from silent retreat. Or, this being a quarantine — I'm retreating silently, while the frogs leave. It's been 92 days since I arrived." Horn abandoned the log a few days later — not to give up on the project, but rather to understand what she had made. "I'm still too close to it, unfortunately," she said. "But I wanted to get away from it so I can come back to it for the next stage. In a way, that's a critical dynamic for me."



Horn has made work in virtually every medium but might be best known for her photographs. The image shown here is a test print for one half of the pair of photos that make up "Untitled No. 16" (2018).



A selection of pages from "LOG" that include an image of the actor Elizabeth Taylor and a quote from the comedian Maria Bamford that reads, "I am paralyzed by hope."

Horn has built a career finding ways to step away from her work and from society. The daughter of a pawnbroker and a homemaker, she grew up in the New York suburbs feeling depressed and distant from those around her. "I'm very, to be honest, in a sense selfish," she said. "I remember feeling that I would have to be selfish to do what I wanted to do." Since graduating with an M.F.A. in sculpture from Yale in 1978, she's taken solo motorcycle treks around Iceland and even, in 1982, lived for six weeks in a lighthouse on the island's southern coast. When President Trump was elected, in 2016, Horn went into a kind of intellectual retreat: "I immediately sat down. I'd always wanted to read 'War and Peace.' I just read it, and it was a way of ignoring reality for the moment until I could deal with it." And when the first cases of Covid-19 emerged in New York, she was already a month into what she calls "voluntary isolation" — her preferred mode of working in her upstate studio. For Horn, gaining distance is not just a requirement for making art: It's a method of survival. The granddaughter of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, she grew up trying to understand why other Jews in Russia and Hungary had not scrambled to escape the pogroms. "You acclimatize to the wrong climate. You acclimatize to the indecent," Horn said. "That interests me. It scares me. I don't want to acclimatize to the wrong weather, and I've known that since I was a child."

From Tuesday, February 23, through April 10, all 404 pages of Horn's "LOG (March 22, 2019-May 17, 2020)" (2019-20) can be viewed on the walls of Hauser & Wirth's Chelsea gallery, one by one, by the visitor who wants to crawl into the artist's brain and rummage around for several hours. Or, if you prefer to gain some perspective yourself, you can step back and take in the full range of the images, displayed in five stacked rows. As the days progress, entries on travel and photos of celebrities — Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe — fade away, text gets denser and images of natural disasters emerge. So does an appreciation for what the pandemic cannot change: the wildlife that flourishes outside Horn's upstate studio, or the cheery lights on a majestic skyscraper at night. Together, the images speak to how we acclimatize over time. A new page seems to suggest a fresh start, but in many cases, its subject reappears months later, just as what we experience as unique is often, in fact, the arrival of something that will hound us. But Horn's "LOG" is also a record of how we can try to survive in times of change: we watch Audrey Hepburn movies, we photograph the wildlife and sometimes we look up at the buildings and notice how strange it is that the lights are still on.

Horn, a writer as much as an artist, chose to type out her answers to T's Artist's Questionnaire before taking follow-up questions on a Zoom call from her Manhattan studio — a 6,000-square-foot loft in a former Barneys warehouse in Chelsea — where she and her studio manager were experimenting with how best to hang her show.



Horn's work often pays homage to literature, and she is also a writer herself. Last year, Princeton University Press released "Island Zombie: Iceland Writings," a collection of Horn's writing from her 40 years of travel to Iceland.



Recurring motifs in "LOG" include a picture of a snowflake, stills from Jean Painlevé's short film "The Octopus" (1928) and an image of a blue bird — the nearly extinct Spix's macaw.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I try to keep routines to a minimum. But when I'm onto something it's easy to spend 12, 14 hours in the studio. That can go on for months. I take random holidays at home for a week or two where I spend all day reading. For many years I worked in Iceland perhaps four to six weeks a year. Those days were quite long between traveling and photography, sunup to sundown. When I'm in New York City I tend to work at night, the very early morning hours (12 to 3 a.m.). As a lifelong insomniac, I find the night is often the best time.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

No idea. But if you define "creative" as the inventive parts of working, I imagine some days just seconds and others hours. A lot of work in the studio doesn't rise to that level.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I wouldn't say it was art, but when I was kid, my father gave me a set of used oil paints from his pawnshop. Most of the colors were dried up and unusable. But with the leftovers, I painted my first and only painting, of cowboys sitting around a campfire in the night. A short time later I did an installation in the woods near my home. I placed a dozen pieces of window glass randomly among the trees and propped each one so it sat at an angle off the ground. At nightfall I lit a candle underneath each glass piece and watched the moths gather on it. Eventually they got so thick it looked like fur. The glass just disappeared.



Horn has been traveling regularly to Iceland since 1978. For her series "Pi" (1997-98), she photographed the horizon there. "In my mind I was photographing the Arctic Circle," she says, "which is located exactly where the horizon of these images is."

What's the worst studio you ever had?

Probably in Providence, R.I., where I went to undergraduate school. I had a studio in a bad neighborhood with very little daylight. It was dangerous and depressing.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

In 1974 I built a 4-by-6-foot ant farm. At that time, it had an elaborate title that I have forgotten now. It was the centerpiece of a performance work. In 1975, the Nature Lab at Rhode Island School of Design bought it for use as a functioning ant farm. I don't remember what it went for. It couldn't have been much, maybe \$500 or \$600.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

First steps are often quite different in my practice from piece to piece. Only with the pigment drawings, where the technique has given me a known way in through many years of practice, do I have a consistent entrance. For the rest of it — the photo work, writing, watercolor drawings, artist's books, the sculpture installations and the occasional performance — the entrance comes by discovery each time: a thought or unexpected insight, a misunderstanding, a coincidence, a mistake, a moment that separates out from previous ones.

How do you know when you're done?

With the drawing and writing, when I stop going vertical, when I realize I'm not going anywhere, when more doesn't take the work farther. With the sculpture, since it is conceptually based and mostly made in industrial settings outside the studio, it is finished whenever the production (specified in advance) is finished. With the photo installations and artist's books I have spent years returning to various locations in Iceland where a work develops in a purely intuitive way. Since I know what I want, but not what it looks like, it takes time to focus it and arrive at some form of clarity. It's a kind of editing process and things come to an end inherently. I rarely wonder if something is finished.



Some of the tools the artist uses for her drawings, including burnishers, mat knives and rubber stamps.

How many assistants do you have?

I have kept my practice quite lean. I have a studio manager and one or two assistants. I don't like people around when I'm working. I order out for the sculpture and photo production anyway. And I'm always changing techniques and technologies, so I continually need to find new resources in terms of skill sets and sources.

Have you assisted other artists before?

No.

What music do you play when you're making art?

It varies a lot: hip-hop, jazz, blues, classical, rock, Indigenous, a cappella, choral music. But lately I haven't been able to listen when I'm working. Ambient sound seems to work best for the time being.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I never have.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

When my niece was quite young, she made this olive tree out of pipe cleaners, wool and glue for me because I'd been away for six months and she was looking forward to seeing me. It's just the ugliest thing you've ever seen, but I absolutely love it. And it appears in the "The Selected Gifts" (1974-present), which is a photo installation that I made by going through my life and pulling all of the gifts given to me.

How often do you talk to other artists?

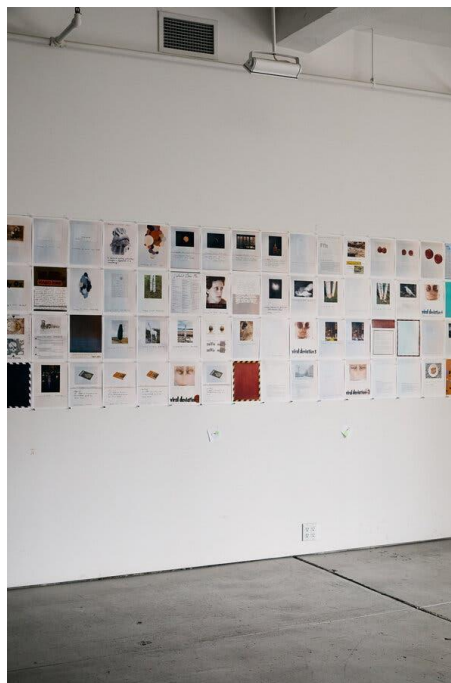
I never thought about it. Many times a week, I think. Though I don't socialize much and the phone doesn't do it for me. Texting is my lifeline now.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I don't, because when I'm inclined to procrastinate, it's a signal to resolve the situation and get back to it. I've always seen it as a form of escapism or maybe laziness. I would say all that came out of being very depressed when I was younger. I noticed that I procrastinated because I was unwilling to ask the tough questions that I needed to ask to move forward. And I saw that happen every time in the creative process, and I said, "No. You walk away now or you dive in." It can be a make-or-break point. So it isn't that I don't procrastinate, I suppose. It's just that I know it doesn't take me anywhere.



Horn's 6,000-square-foot studio in Chelsea gives her enough room to work on large-scale drawings, test layouts for installations and maintain an archive of her work.



Altogether, "LOG" comprises 404 images made over 422 days.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

It's a bad time to be asking such a question. So many things these days. But in this moment, perhaps the killing of two of the recently discovered three white giraffes.

What do you usually wear when you work?

I dress the same way in the studio as out. When I draw I wear a work shirt.

What do you pay for rent?

I own my studios and home, so no rent but a lot of taxes.

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

I don't do much bulk buying. Maybe paper — especially Arches watercolor paper. And olive oil. I don't really use dairy in cooking, and my partner is a brilliant cook, so we consume a lot of olive oil

What's your worst habit?

Insomnia? Which is more a physiological imperative and not a true habit. I've had it since I was a child. I remember crying myself to sleep. But I've grown to enjoy it. In fact, sometimes I anticipate it and I settle into it.

What embarrasses you?

People getting flustered or aggressive when they can't decipher my gender. Getting kicked out of women's bathrooms. I could write a book about just these experiences. In the early '80s, there was the Munich train station. The matron chased me out, screaming, "Raus! Raus!" Or a couple of years ago, it was the business-class lounge in the airport in Mexico City. A woman got armed cops to come in and get me out.

Do you exercise?

I take occasional walks. My work has always demanded a lot of me physically, especially the drawings now that they are often 10 to 12 feet high. My travels in Iceland as well. A lot of hiking with camera equipment. No gyms or routines, though.

What are you reading?

Vasily Grossman's "Stalingrad" (1952) and "JR" (1975) by William Gaddis.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

This is a trick question. It would be arbitrary to pick one. There's just so much that has affected me, engaged me, deeply. Some things can't be abridged.