

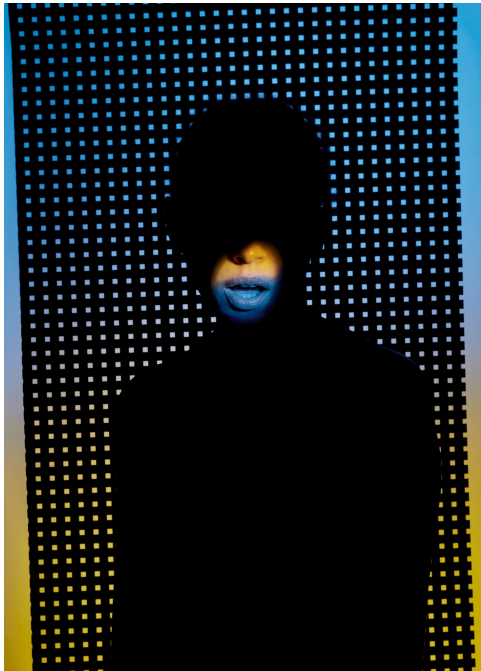
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How to Be a Photographer Right Now

Three artists confront how COVID-19 has changed their lives and work—and how they see the world.

By Aaron Schuman



The crisis is not only affecting photographers engaged in documentary and reportage, but also practitioners who work in a wide array of genres. “Art always feels somewhat inconsequential in times of real crisis,” lens-based artist Hannah Whitaker, who lives in New York and is well known for her experimental, multilayered and semiabstracted studio-based photographic approach, noted in an email. “But I know it’s important. It might not be able to get us out of this crisis, but it can help us out of our holes—like Ariana Reines’ recent new moon report, ‘Our Crown,’ in Artforum, which gave words to that strange combination of death and mundanity that characterizes this moment.”

For many studio-based artists and photographers, like Whitaker, social distancing and self-isolation are not entirely unfamiliar territory when it comes to being both explained.

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“Solitude and volatility are baked into being an artist, and usually I thrive in those conditions. I like being alone and normally embrace these kinds of structural limitations: What can I do with one sheet of 4×5 film? What photograph can I make with just the lighting and props I have on hand?” Whitaker acknowledges that she can walk to her studio, where she has all the equipment she needs, and can work alone—that is, when she isn’t looking after her three-year-old son. “But today is my day to stay at home with my son, who hasn’t played with another child in over three weeks,” she said, “so to be honest, I’m having a hard time.”productive and creative. “In some ways, my life is ideally suited for this crisis,” Whitaker



The potential long-term effects of all of this are also starting to weigh on the minds of many photographers and artists. “I can deal with the normal ups and downs of my income and so on,” Whitaker noted, “but what’s new now is that I’m aware of the fact that this down may not be followed by an up for a long time, and may go deeper than any I’ve known. I know how lucky I am to be an artist, but I’ve worked my whole life to build this life as an artist—a life that is central to my selfhood—and that’s what I worry could be lost.”

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From studio practice to commercial and editorial work, all photographers are aware that we are entering a new landscape. “Everything feels different now,” Powell told me, “and I’m uncertain about how to push my practice forward right now. There’s a different sense of time, which is simultaneously both intimate and global; sometimes the clock seems to be ticking very loudly, and other times not at all.” To keep himself busy and inspired, Powell explained that he’s reading a lot, looking at photobooks—“They still work, and will keep on working,” he stressed—and trying to make pictures of his life: his home, his children climbing trees, or the streets of Brooklyn from the driver’s seat of his car on a run for groceries.

“I’m not thinking about maintaining what I’ve already done,” Powell said, “but instead about how something new can be made, and about the kind of artist I want to be. I’m asking myself, How I can contribute to humanity with creativity and honesty?”

