All the Lonely Artists

ANDREW HOLLERAN

I’VE SPENT much of the last few years in artists’ archives,” Olivia Laing writes on the Acknowledgments page of her new book—partly in Chicago to research the work of Henry Darger, an outsider artist who worked as a janitor most of his life, and partly in Pittsburgh, where she falls in love with the Warhol Museum going through the time capsules Andy left behind: boxes filled with everything from pieces of pizza to New York Posts to personal letters to a mummified human foot. But mostly this is a book about New York, where the author lives in various sublets in Brooklyn, the East Village, and Times Square, as she wanders the city thinking about the artists she feels drawn to in her solitude: Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, David Wojnarowicz, and Klaus Nomi. It is also a city whose sublets seem to inspire the sort of melancholy that’s inseparable from a nostalgia—evident in books like Patti Smith’s memoir about her life with Robert Mapplethorpe, Just Kids (2010)—for a time when New York was a lot scruffier than it is now. “Most of the time,” she writes, “I sublet a friend’s apartment on East 2nd Street, in a neighborhood full of community gardens. It was an unreconstructed tenement, painted arsenic green, with a claw-footed bathtub in the kitchen, concealed behind a molding curtain.”

“What does it feel like to be lonely?” Laing asks at the outset of her pilgrimage:

It feels like being hungry: like being hungry when everyone around you is readying for a feast. It feels shameful and alarming, and over time these feelings radiate outwards, making the lonely person increasingly isolated, increasingly estranged. It hurts, in the way that feelings do, and it also has physical consequences that take place invisibly, inside the closed compartments of the body. It advances, is what I’m trying to say, cold as ice and clear as glass, enclosing and engulfing.

If all the subjects chosen by Laing have loneliness in common, their sexuality runs the gamut. Half are gay, two are straight, and one is impossible to classify. The book opens with Edward Hopper, the married man whose paintings have become synonymous with American loneliness—though he resisted this interpretation. (“The loneliness thing is overdone,” he said. “I probably am a lonely one.”) The next chapter belongs to Andy Warhol and his desire to hide behind machines like his tape recorder or Polaroid camera, which Laing connects not only with a profound shyness but with an insecurity about speaking (his Slovak upbringings, his Pittsburgh accent). Next is David Wojnarowicz, and his very rough years as a young hustler operating around Times Square at a time when the entire city was, as they say, on the skids. Then the strange life of Henry Darger, a man raised in institutions who spent his life swabbing the floors of another institution, a Catholic hospital, while painting his bizarre imagined universe, The Realms of the Unreal. Then back to New York for Klaus Nomi, the extraordinary countertenor and performance artist who died early in the AIDS epidemic, and Peter Hujar, the photographer who became Wojnarowicz’ mentor before dying, like Wojnarowicz, of AIDS.

When Laing moves to Times Square, perhaps the most alienating of all her sublets, she tells us about Josh Harris, an Internet boy wonder who created the first group house in which people were invited to live in a space where they would be on camera all the time, which leads to meditations on what the Internet has done to our desire for connection. Then, in the last chapter, we return to Warhol, his friend Jean Michel Basquiat, Billie Holiday, and Zoe Leonard, an artist who stitched together the skins of eaten oranges, bananas, avocados, etc., to memorialize David Wojnarowicz, a friend she’d made in Act Up, for an installation called Strange Fruit. Strange Fruit was inspired by the Vanitas tradition in art—a work meant to vanish, like an installation at the Hide/Seek exhibit a few years ago in D.C. (the first show of GLBT artists at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art), which consisted of a heap of candies that visitors were invited to eat, thus making the pile dwindle the way the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ lover wasted away from AIDS.

If Tolstoy captured the basic human dilemma—that we live and die alone—in his story “The Death of Ivan Illich,” Laing, using the work of psychologists and other writers, takes a more analytical approach. Loneliness, she points out, can be a fear of abandonment, or shyness, or an inability to speak—to voice our feelings and thoughts—or the unsatisfied desire to be watched (leading some people to substitute fame for intimacy), or even hoarding. Henry Darger collected string, and after he died his apartment was found to be stuffed not only with his paintings of little girls with penises but also with the longest novel in American history, albeit unpublished. Warhol collected everything from expensive antiques to cookie jars to—well, go to Pittsburgh and check out the Time Capsules.

Laing’s book is a version of Vasari’s Lives of the Artists, only in this case they are all massively alienated. Warhol, we learn, was not only skittish about being touched by other people, and stayed home from school for a year as a child after a girl in his class kicked him, but gave up trying to acquire friends when he moved to New York and found he could get the company he needed from a television he bought at Macy’s. Woj-

Andrew Holleran’s novels include Dancer from the Dance, Grief, and The Beauty of Men.
"All the Lonely Women in the World" is a song written and recorded by American country singer-songwriter Bill Anderson. It was released as a single in 1972 via Decca Records and became a major hit the same year. "All the Lonely Women in the World" was recorded on November 16, 1971, at the Bradley Studio, located in Nashville, Tennessee. The sessions were produced by Owen Bradley, who would serve as Anderson's producer through most of years with Decca Records. The track "Lonely Weekends" was also recorded on November 16, 1971, at the Bradley Studio.

Artists A-Z

All the lonely people, where do they all belong? Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear
No one comes near look at him working Nodding his socks in the night when there's nobody there
What does he care? All the lonely people, where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, where do they all belong? I look at all the lonely people I look at all the lonely people. Died in the church and was buried alone with her name, nobody came
Wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from her grave
No one was saved
All the lonely people, where do they all come from?
All the lonely people are saved
Lonely Artists is a group for anyone feeling lonely or unloved, and willing to share art on the theme of loneliness. Don't stay alone now.
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More.

"Just a castaway An island lost at sea Another lonely day With no one here but me
More loneliness Than any man could bear Rescue me before I fall into despair. I'll send an SOS to the world I hope that someone gets my Message in a bottle. A year has passed since I wrote my note But I should have known this right from the start Only hope can keep me together Love can mend your life But love can break your heart. I'll send an SOS to the world I hope that someone gets my Message in a bottle."