

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times
Five Artists to Follow on Instagram Now
Martha Schwendener
6 May 2020

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Take a look at David Adjaye’s sketchbook, Ola Ronke Akinmowo’s black female writers, Andrea Zittel in seclusion and weird works from Brad Phillips and David Shrigley.



Image: Travels with David Adjaye on Instagram include a “magical trip to #tamaleghana to visit shear butter producers in the regions around this northern city. Beautiful cylindrical rammed earth vernacular homes with palm roofing.” Credit: David Adjaye

I am less than pleased with the “sponsored” advertising-to-content ratio on Instagram. And yet that social media platform is still the best for looking at art and witnessing the creative process of an artist. (And I use the word “artist” loosely: I’m an avid consumer of memes.) I once described Instagram to a fellow critic as the “show-me-the-money” platform, and she agreed: substance (or lack thereof) is revealed pretty quickly, since you’re generally looking at one image at a time with minimal captioning. I overhaul my feed frequently, unfollowing accounts that fail to amuse, inspire or inform. Here are five Instagram accounts I consistently view; New York Times critics will be posting their own picks every week.

The Free Black Women’s Library (@thefreeblackwomenslibrary)

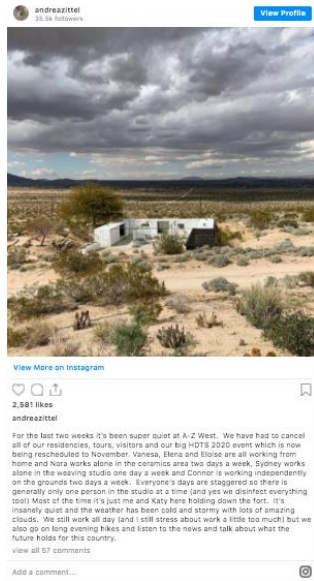


Ola Ronke Akinmowo’s project is a mobile, pop-up library that showcases literature written by black women. It could be described as a social practice artwork, but also a participatory one: to borrow a book, you must give a book. I have learned about overlooked writers here, but also about Regina Anderson Andrews, who headed a library in Harlem and was friendly with Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. Ms. Akinmowo, who lives in Brooklyn, has taken the library to New York Public Library branches and the NY Art Book Fair. During the quarantine she’s focused on authors like Octavia Butler, the science fiction writer who predicted some of the dystopias we’re now experiencing. Ms. Akinmowo also posts some of her own collages, like one devoted to Harriet Tubman, which combine black and white found images with bright, almost psychedelic flourishes.

Andrea Zittel (@andreazittel)

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“How to live?” Andrea Zittel’s Instagram profile asks. Great question. Ms. Zittel offers a model in A-Z West, her “Institute of Investigative Living” on 70 acres in Joshua Tree, Calif., that serves as a self-actualized art-in-the-desert fantasy. You could name many precedents for Ms. Zittel’s project: Drop City in Colorado, with its dome architecture inspired by Buckminster Fuller; Arcosanti in Arizona; or Georgia O’Keeffe and Agnes Martin’s art studios in the American Southwest. Ms. Zittel’s version of semi-off-the-grid, live-work-create utopia can be experienced close-hand(ish) on Instagram. Modernist-influenced buildings, furniture, weavings and clothing function here not just as daily trappings but also as an ongoing investigation into “human nature and the social construction of needs.” Ms. Zittel has been working on these concepts for more than 20 years. The rest of us are getting a crash course.

Brad Phillips (@brad_phillips_group_show)



“I know a lot about art,” the Canadian painter and writer Brad Phillips brags on his Instagram profile. OK, so what’ve you got, smart guy? First of all, Mr. Phillips works best with words, arranged into minimal acerbic poems on his account @brad_phillips. (One reads “America is my favourite movie.”) The other account, @brad_phillips_group_show, is an agreeable reminder that artists often make the best curators. Here you can see the work of Cristine Brache (Mr. Phillips’s wife), who also twists words into artworks, or Léon Spilliaert (1881-1946), an outré Belgian Symbolist painter who worked as an illustrator for Edgar Allan Poe’s publisher and shared a similar creepy, horror-tinged approach. Like those of most artist-curators, Mr. Phillips’s picks are highly idiosyncratic and reflect his own work’s proclivities. But unlike many artists who think they can school you on art, Mr. Phillips actually delivers.

David Adjaye (@adjaye_visual_sketchbook)

David Adjaye is the world-renowned architect who led the consortium that designed the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington. More than practically any other account I follow, his Instagram visual sketchbook allows you to see inside the mind of a great designer. You get to travel the world like an international “starchitect,” and view the built environment from a technical angle. Mr. Adjaye, of Ghanaian descent, marvels over modernist buildings and palm-roofed structures in Ghana. He also analyzes high modernist architecture, and structures made by non-humans, like a termite tower in Africa constructed to avoid floods. Humans, Mr. Adjaye informs us, use these astonishing towers as a marker of where to construct their own dwellings. “Talk about organic architecture,” one commenter marveled.

David Shrigley (@davidshrigley)

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Funny is good at this moment. David Shrigley, a British artist who creates posters, books, cartoons, tattoos and “other stuff,” as his website describes it, long ago mastered the art-as-comedy angle. His crudely drawn illustrations are wry, smart, sometimes angry, sometimes self-effacing — but almost always absurd. They parallel a generation of dry, weird comedy from Britain, including Sacha Baron Cohen, Eddie Izzard or “Little Britain” (Matt Lucas and David Walliams). His creations work equally well on the gallery wall, hung salon-style at Anton Kern in New York, or on Instagram, where the images are stripped down, even more existential and sometimes naughtier. One recent drawing declares “It Won’t Be Like This Forever.” Styled as a tabloid newspaper cover, this message registers as reassuring, but with a hint of menace.