

SHELF
LIFE

**FAVORITES
FROM
OUR ARCHIVE
OF NONPERISHABLE
CULTURAL
SUSTENANCE.**

In the spring of 2020, as a way of documenting the joys that could be found among the hardships during the pandemic, we asked artists, curators, writers, editors, and friends to send us lists of things—books, movies, recipes, art, articles, even exercises—that were enriching and sustaining their now-isolated daily lives. We compiled these contributions as a digital archive on the Nasher website in a space called Shelf Life, of which excerpts are republished here.

MATTHEW RONAY, ARTIST / Dagobert Peche

A young and vibrant member of the Wiener Werkstätte and, according to Josef Hoffmann, “the greatest ornamental genius Austria has produced since the Baroque.” The Wiener Werkstätte happened to be an enigmatic moment in the early 20th century when the meshing of artist, artisan, and client was at its pinnacle. I’ve tried to absorb all its artists and the ones that came before it in the Vienna Secession. Peche was the most eccentric and died fairly young. He disavowed his work for the Werkstätte in the end, and really just wanted to be a painter. Sadly, we never got a chance to see these works as he was mowed down by tuberculosis complications.

VICKI MEEK, ARTIST / Ida B. Wells

As a 70-year-old African American, I have lived through some tumultuous times in this country but none quite like this. I grew up with parents who were deeply involved in Black liberation activities, so the notion of activism as your life’s work is nothing new to me. A person I read and reread is Ida B. Wells because she embodies the warrior woman I always strive to be. Her devotion to African American people was unshakeable, and I like to think mine is also. I am continually studying ancient African spiritual practices, mining them for ways to reconnect African Americans to their African ancestors, since I believe the way to thrive in inhospitable surroundings is by grounding oneself in your culture. My personal library is full of books that allow me to touch base with my deepest roots whenever I need to.

JULIE BAUMGARDNER, WRITER / Modern Witches of Art

Over this quarantine, I’ve been called witchy by quite a few folks, so naturally I reflected over the artworks I’ve gravitated to the most over the last year or so. Well, well, well, what do we have here? A small coven of witches, if I do say so myself: Carol Rama, Gertrude Abercrombie, Leonor Fini, Genieve Figgis, Margot Berman, of course famous Frida. Do I mean cauldron-stirring, broom-riding, pointy-hat ladies? No! (And don’t worry, I mean no insult to Brujas). These women all had a mystical, magical means to them that unsettled and dismantled the confines of expectations for women, women artists and women’s aesthetic concerns—and all the while produced beautiful, alluring, meaningful, expressive work that tapped into something beyond human logic and rationality can quantify. We could all serve to learn something from women who see through social constructs and deep into the ineffable.

EVAN MOFFITT, WRITER / *Life: A User's Manual* by Georges Perec, 1978

If you're wondering what your neighbors are up to, this French classic takes a single moment in time and space—a Paris apartment block at 8 p.m. on June 23, 1975—and unfolds it, room by corridor by stairwell, into a constellation of lives. Family squabbles, romance, murder, and competitive cycling all coincide in a dizzying literary dissection.

ARLENE SHECHET, ARTIST

You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin by Rachel Corbett, 2016

Fascinating entwined lives. I'm interested in both of these artists, but the misogyny is bottomless. What were we all thinking when we used Rilke's words in our marriage ceremonies?

WILL ARBERY, WRITER / *The Criterion Channel*

This pandemic has given me the feeling of being a boy again, when I would watch as many movies as I could, often staying up till 4 a.m., skipping my homework, worrying my parents. The fact is I was falling in love. Nothing does me in like a great film. I'll clutch my heart and sigh on my fainting couch. I'll look up the filmmakers and mistake them for the Thing. Lately, I've fallen in love with: *La Ciénaga* by Lucrecia Martel, *Memories of Underdevelopment* by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, *An Angel at My Table* by Jane Campion, *Losing Ground* by Kathleen Collins. And returning to the *Three Colors Trilogy* by Krzysztof Kiesłowski.

KATHRYN ANDREWS, ARTIST / Alvin Baltrop

Alvin Baltrop was a wonderfully gifted photographer from the Bronx who documented gay life during the 60s, 70s, and 80s during his time in the military and later as a frequent visitor to the Hudson River Piers. I keep thinking about Baltrop. I saw the recent retrospective at the Bronx Museum weeks before the shutdown and was extremely moved by the development of his vision over time and his curiosity about seeing all things, including the forbidden—many of his photographs are voyeuristic. Baltrop struggled financially throughout his life, undoubtedly as a result of growing up in a post-war system that remained highly racist and homophobic. Despite all odds, he produced a very powerful body of work. Sadly, he passed away in 2004, prior to its coming to light.

TOM BURR, ARTIST / 'Learning from the Virus' by Paul B. Preciado

Paul B. Preciado has become one of the most important voices in the last several years, and this recent piece published in *Artforum* only reinforces that. As a Foucauldian, I was thankful to see the philosopher's thinking and biographical position figured in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the clear trajectory of the relationship of power to the body. Immunity status is presented as intertwined with isolation, and with privilege. Disconnection and distance, with domination. The new telecommunications-as-community, as forms of incarceration. But a choice is proposed of, on the one hand, allowing the forms of control being perfected through the confluence of crisis and capital to render us utterly submissive, or, of opening up the possibility of some form of emancipatory “mutation” of those conditions. Preciado concludes, “Governments are calling for confinement and telecommuting. We know they are calling for de-collectivization and telecontrol. Let us use the time and strength of confinement to study the tradition of struggle and resistance among racial and sexual minority cultures that have helped us survive until now. Let us turn off our cell phones, let us disconnect from the internet. Let us stage a big blackout against the satellites observing us, and let us consider the coming revolution together.”

RANDY KENNEDY, WRITER / *The Walk* by Robert Walser, posthumously published, 1957

Walser, the Swiss novelist who ended his days in a mental hospital, was one of the most extraordinary voices of the 20th century. In a review of another of his books for *The New York Times*, I once described him as “stranger than Kafka, more elusive than Walter Benjamin” and I stand by that. This slim book follows Walser on a solitary walk through town and countryside. “From every direction and distance, all things great and good emerged brightly with marvelous, uplifting gestures. In the midst of this beautiful place, I thought of nothing but this place itself: all other thoughts sank away.” (Walser was found lying dead in the snow in 1956, after he left his asylum for a long stroll and didn't return.)