

# Unmasking the Future: Interview with Paula Billups, Curator of *The Babel Masks*

By Megan K. Hughes

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## **Abstract**

Fashion scholar Megan K. Hughes interviews artist and curator, Paula Billups, creator of *The Babel Masks*. Billups' project began at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and was the first effort to create a virtual gallery of masks, made by artists located worldwide. As a virtual show, Billups' *The Babel Masks*, showcases a range of artist responses to her leading curatorial question: What will masks look like, 100 years from now? The resulting collection, and the inspired community of artists that Billups generated through her curation, now stands as an ongoing virtual gallery and a reflective look at artistic responses to the pandemic. This up-close, conversational look at Billups' process, from ideation to publication, is a dialogue centering on art, fashion, culture, community, the future, and the transformative shift brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Read through to learn more about Billups, her concept of "Microtemporal Archaeology," and how she began this online, global gallery of artists' masks.

**FIGURE 1** "MASKER MET TWE KREEFTESCHAREN DIE SLANGEN VASTHOUDEN," BY FRANS HUYS, CORNELIS FLORIS, HANS LIEFRINCK. 1555 C.E. (PROPERTY OF RIJKSMUSEUM).

Forward-thinking ideas seem to sprout after a moment of reflection, and since the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect the global population in early 2020, everyone's had some extra time to think. Two years later, in 2022, communities around the world are still reeling with the effects of several waves of COVID-19 variants. Though some health restrictions are beginning to lift in the Omicron era, wearing masks is still a requirement for many basic public tasks like taking transportation, or while in public health settings.



In the beginning of the anti-viral efforts, masks were worn by emergency workers and soon rose to daily-wear status for everyone, everywhere. Fashion houses across the world, from independent companies to large-label brands, began to pivot products and concentrate on efforts to sell non-medical masks as a way to stay in business. This response helped many design houses survive the chain of lockdowns that followed. Designers and artists alike have begun to reimagine collections, and seasons themselves, but all must continue to consider the mask as a staple symbol, and accessory, of the global pandemic response. The mask represents the changing face of the future.

Traditional audiences have transitioned into online events and virtual conferencing, and use of these internet-fueled mediums has skyrocketed steadily since early 2020. Fashion labels and galleries alike have been changing their recent commercial focuses to include online influencers, virtual shows, personalization options, and one-day shipping options. Actual physical presence in stores and galleries has suddenly been layered by masks and wait times, appointments and signage.

The online world has benefitted massively from these physical challenges. Now more than ever before, the internet has become a space for social engagement and community-building through collaborative efforts and conversations on websites built to house almost every available topic. If the virtual space does not yet exist, it can easily be created. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have had to choose how to engage with this expansive virtual world, and quickly learn new ways of connecting.

In the midst of adapting to the changing COVID-19 pandemic rules of 2020, and the surging fervor for virtual content, multidisciplinary artist and curator Paula Billups decided to imagine the new, mask-laden future. She set her sights one hundred years away, to 2120, a time in which everyone has learned to embrace the mask in one way or another. Billups used her pandemic-time at home to imagine a way to produce an online, open call for innovative textile art, to seek international artists to imagine this future along with her. She then installed the final, juried submissions online, in the viewable, virtual ever-present moment, as a permanent record of the changing importance of the mask itself. Her show, *The Babel Masks*, is a ground-breaking act of artistic community-building, centered on documenting the possible future of society from where it exists today: physically locked-down, in masked mode.

Billups' idea to capture the mask as a symbol of both the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a metaphoric node for future change, continues her work in capturing small changes, or morphing layers of the environment, before they change again; she calls this process "Microtemporal Archaeology." When Billups saw that the status of masks was quickly changing and integrating into daily life in early 2020, she saw the opportunity to curate the web of responses developing about masks into a shareable show. Applying her vision of documenting change to the new and changing symbol of the mask, Billups has curated an online environment where time is fluid, both historical and futuristic at once, and that exists on-demand through the internet.

Billups' artists were encouraged to envision a future in which masks had become super-individualized, or hyper-realized, as a response to imagining an entire century of evolution beyond, to 2120, in which the mask is still a necessary accessory. Combining utilitarianism with fashion provided *The Babel Masks* artists a chance to create textile pieces that show a wide variety of speculative streams about the future of both masks, and of human nature.

Through the free, international open call for submissions she posted online, Billups began to curate an intriguing set of artists' interpretations of a future one hundred years ahead. What began as her question to artists, online, "What will masks look like, 100 years in the future?" quickly morphed into an overwhelming response from textile artists everywhere.

Billups found herself having to narrow the catalogue to just twenty-five textile artists from around the world, whose work represents a range of various futures for the mask, and who have created them using a wide variety of techniques. Within the show, artists who may never have had the chance to show together pre-pandemic, because of geography, or circumstance, come together and have an honest look at where the mask might take us, as a whole, through the lenses of individual practice. Audiences from anywhere are able to access the

show online at anytime, and discuss the relatable mask symbol from their own perspectives. In this way, a new type of community has been created online by Billups, built through the collaboration of these textile artists, and her own apt prognostication, and solidified by a collective intent to imagine new futures.

The textile artists that Billups chose to show in *The Babel Masks* feature perspectives that look outward and forward at once, as a mask does, but also suggest the personal histories, intentions, and creative energies of their individual creators. The resulting show is much more than a collection of highly artistic masks, and can be viewed as a finely curated set of personal histories and creative processes of professional artists, thrown forward into a faceted, mask-centered future. Within *The Babel Masks*, individualism is as valuable as safety, and each artist's voice is highlighted in its own context, using the mask as a binding object between them as well as Billups' own imaginative curatorial vision.

The result of the collection of submissions became *The Babel Masks*, a virtual show comprised of twenty-five masks and artist statements. The virtual show itself, and its adjoining tangible catalogue, represent a cross-section of global cultures, identities, histories, genders, speculative thought, and community coordination. Despite being located all over the planet, the artists' work as a whole show that despite new physical rules, we are still able to dream, and to adapt, together.

The multitude of perspectives and processes within this collection of masks is bound together by a collective desire to envision a new future. Some artists have presented work made with biological materials, while others have blended traditional art practices with new materials, or have found an unconventional way to use a traditional material. The show is an almost endless, curious journey, featuring both the masks, and the faces of the artists behind every piece. An individual artist's creation within *The Babel Masks* becomes a facet of the world we are starting to imagine together as a whole, worldwide, with each mask speaking of the steps it will take to arrive there.

The bridges that Billups' *The Babel Masks* show has created, between art and accessory, the personal and global, the present and the future, is an innovative exploration of conceptual fusions. The show can be viewed from technical, creative, or theoretical lenses, with each artist presenting overlapping systems of inspiration, based on their own artistic practices. As personal items, masks represent safety, anonymity, and hygiene, but also imply the idea of the faces hidden behind them, that may or may not be revealed. In *The Babel Masks*, Billups' choice to include artists' statements, along with each piece, has shown a rare and intriguing look at the artistic inspiration behind each mask.

Since its launch in 2020, *The Babel Masks* show has been viewed worldwide, and has been featured in Berlin, Germany and Los Angeles, USA. I spoke to Paula Billups online about how she imagined, curated, and recorded this range of future possibilities from textile artists around the world, represented by wearable masks, and how she virtually created an international community while she was at it. Through her open call for artist submissions, I was fortunate to have my work chosen by Paula, and exhibit in *The Babel Masks* as an artist. In our back-and-forth online editing sessions, it became clear that Paula Billups was driven to discuss masks and the future, and to build a connection between artists through her online exhibition at a time when the globe was still adjusting to the concept of COVID-19.

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### ON THE GENESIS OF *THE BABEL MASKS*

**MKH:** Hi Paula, thanks so much for this interview. Can you please introduce us to you, and the creative framework that inspired this show?

**PB:** I'm Paula Billups, and I'm a fine artist and curator of *The Babel Masks*. I have an MFA from the Transart Institute in Berlin and a BFA from the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts, and have completed coursework on curatorial studies at the Zurich University of the Arts. Initially, my own work focused on painting and drawing, but in the last ten years I have started to include collage, installation, performance, and collaboration in my work. Very recently I have included the practice of autotheory into my work. "The Librarian of Babel," started out as a character for a set of performance/participation works I did in 2015. In 2020 "The Librarian of Babel" morphed into a name for an ad-hoc collective organization whose first project was *The Babel Masks*. So now the official title for my role is "Head Librarian" within this context.

## **MKH:** How did you arrive at your concept of Microtemporal Archaeology, and what does curating this way add to the creative world?

**PB:** In 2013 I was in Berlin and far into a series of collages which used ephemera that crossed my path to create partially obscured narratives about my time there. Berlin's surface appearance changes rapidly thanks to workers who move through the city at night with buckets of paste and rolls of new posters to obscure the old. By morning, Berlin has gained a fresh look and its most recent layer of present culture. It occurred to me that these are micro-ages of history and human society which rise and appear too quickly to be documented. This constant shifting of character is too granular for conventional archaeologists: they are looking at the world epochally.

My works based in collage, time, and space I call Palimpsests. They took over my practice for six years. From these I evolved the idea of Microtemporal Archaeology as a sub-field of archaeology. As a younger person, I attended annual field schools for amateur archaeologists, and later worked as a lab technician for the landmark dig near my hometown.

## **MKH:** How did you generate the idea to do an exhibit called, *"The Babel Masks,"* and develop the idea for your note: "What Will Masks Look Like, 100 Years in the Future?"

**PB:** I imagined an exhibition full of masks and thought how interesting it would be if the exhibit cast the visitor in the role of a person coming from 100 years in the past, from the origins of the COVID pandemic, to see how artists and high-fashion designers had played with and innovated the mask as an art form over a hundred years of evolving couture. I wanted a group of artists who could tackle that proposal in a deeply imaginative way. I invited two dynamic curators, Dermis León, and Quintín Rivera Toro, to act as jurors, and they accepted. I put out a call for entries to reach artists from everywhere. The rest was up to the artists. My role was that of show director and curator. This show became the first project of the collective The Librarian of Babel.

## ON CURATING AN INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

**MKH:** Why was the call for submissions advertised as open and international, and what were you hoping to see? Were your expectations fulfilled, and/or changed, by the various artist submissions?

**PB:** In my career I have seen too many calls that were exclusionary in some way and that asked the artists to pay in order to participate or even apply. I wanted our proposal to be radically inclusive, and the fact that the entire thing was happening in the virtual world made that possible. The exhibition space was in the ether, and there were few bars to participation. There was no restriction on age, geographical region, ethnicity or nationality, gender, or medium. Most importantly, there was no fee either to enter or to show the work.

My expectations were exceeded — the work that came in was created at the highest level of artistry, and each mask had a complex history and a deep story that spoke both to the artist's lived experience and their responses and connections with the pandemic and how it affected them. The variety of masks was dazzling, and the quality of the work was breathtaking.

**MKH:** When the project was launched, what kind of responses did you receive? Did any surprise or challenge you?

**PB:** The response was overwhelmingly positive and supportive. The feedback from several directions was that we as a group had done an important show at the right time, that we had produced an exhibition of significance. I've also received feedback that looking at these masks has provided a sense of healing and hope. I was very happy to hear that, because in a shamanistic tradition the mask is a spiritual instrument to leave the physical world and its ills to visit a place of healing and to bring that change back with you into the world.

Along with the launch of the exhibition we had the release of the catalog and a semi-live event in Berlin at an art venue called Das Kapital, run by Ismael Duá. We also used the collective's YouTube and Facebook channels to present the work and to present video interviews with several of the artists. Each artist also had their work featured for a week in a spotlight page on the site.

Because we used so many instruments to promote the show, the response was in general very positive. People had so many ways to connect with the work. The strongest feedback I got was from the exhibition catalog, which featured in-depth interviews with the artists as well as images of their masks and their artist statements. People were really knocked out by that. I felt it was important for there to be physical manifestations of the exhibit when possible, since as a culture we are not used to engaging with art on a strictly virtual level.

As for challenges, well; in COVID where everyone was trying to learn skills they hadn't necessarily needed to use in the past, there were one or two technical glitches with the live presentations. This seems always to be the case, that when mounting an exhibition there will be a glitch, and in the case of this show, these were ours. The response to that challenge is to do the best you can and learn from it for next time.

The exhibition has since been featured at the American Heritage College in a special event which spotlighted some of our artists and presented the masks in a second virtual exhibition, which was a very pleasant turn of events.





**FIGURE 2** THE BABEL MASKS COVER PHOTO: DETAIL FROM "MASKER MET TWEE KREEFTESCHAREN DIE SLANGEN VASTHOUDEN," BY FRANS HUYS, CORNELIS FLORIS, HANS LIEFRINCK. 1555 C.E. (PROPERTY OF RIJKSMUSEUM).

## ON REVEALING THE MASK AS A SYMBOL

**MKH:** How does *The Babel Masks* project bridge the gap between functional accessories and fine art?

**PB:** By asking the artists and audience to consider the apparatus of the mask in terms of surviving and then thriving, and by presenting the masks as proof that we did so for at least another hundred years.

The conceit of the show is that we can't do without the masks anymore: in that case, humanity in its inevitable restless creativity will start to fool around with the functional and include it in the cultural narrative. I consider couture design to be fine art along with all the other disciplines, and so this wearable and humble surgical mask might appear to artists to hold the challenge of the blank page. How far can we go with this? What hasn't been thought of yet?

The only rules about making the mask were that it had to function as a protective filter over the mouth and nose and it had to be wearable: otherwise it could be any shape and size and material the artist chose. They went to amazing places with the materials and designs.

**MKH:** Looking at the artists' submissions overall, how do you feel their masks, which were made for the future, also reflect the energies of today's global mask-wearing society?

**PB:** They had a variety of connections to this current global society. Some created narratives that the ceremonial and tribal aspects of their own societies had made it into the next century and had flourished. Some took up our ever-present concerns for the climate and global environmental crises to address their design using upcycled, recycled, discarded, and found materials. They sometimes considered the struggles women face across the globe and took the opportunity to voice those struggles in art. In so many cases the artists imagined a better future: they widened the aperture on societal, moral, ethical, and environmental issues that we are now getting our first glimpses of: the knowledge that we are not doing so well in so many ways, particularly in the arenas of self-determination for all human beings, regard for all life forms, and care for our planet's future. That's why I think this show is significant.

**MKH:** When reviewing the artists' submissions, did you find any common threads amongst the works? If so, or if not, can you describe some examples?

**PB:** There was a thread of the celebration of the artist's culture that several of the artists dove into when designing their masks. There was a thread of engineering and foresight, where the artists foresaw the actual physical difficulties long-term use of a mask might cause and created masks intended to alleviate or address those problems. There were masks made by women and gender-fluid artists which explored some of the most painful aspects of gender discrimination. In many cases the artists drew a direct line from their lived experience to the mask with uncommon candor. Among twenty-five artists there were a few themes, though even within those themes the variation was great. The uniqueness of these masks and the level of mastery every artist possessed, the level of thought they put into the masks, was the defining characteristic of the show.

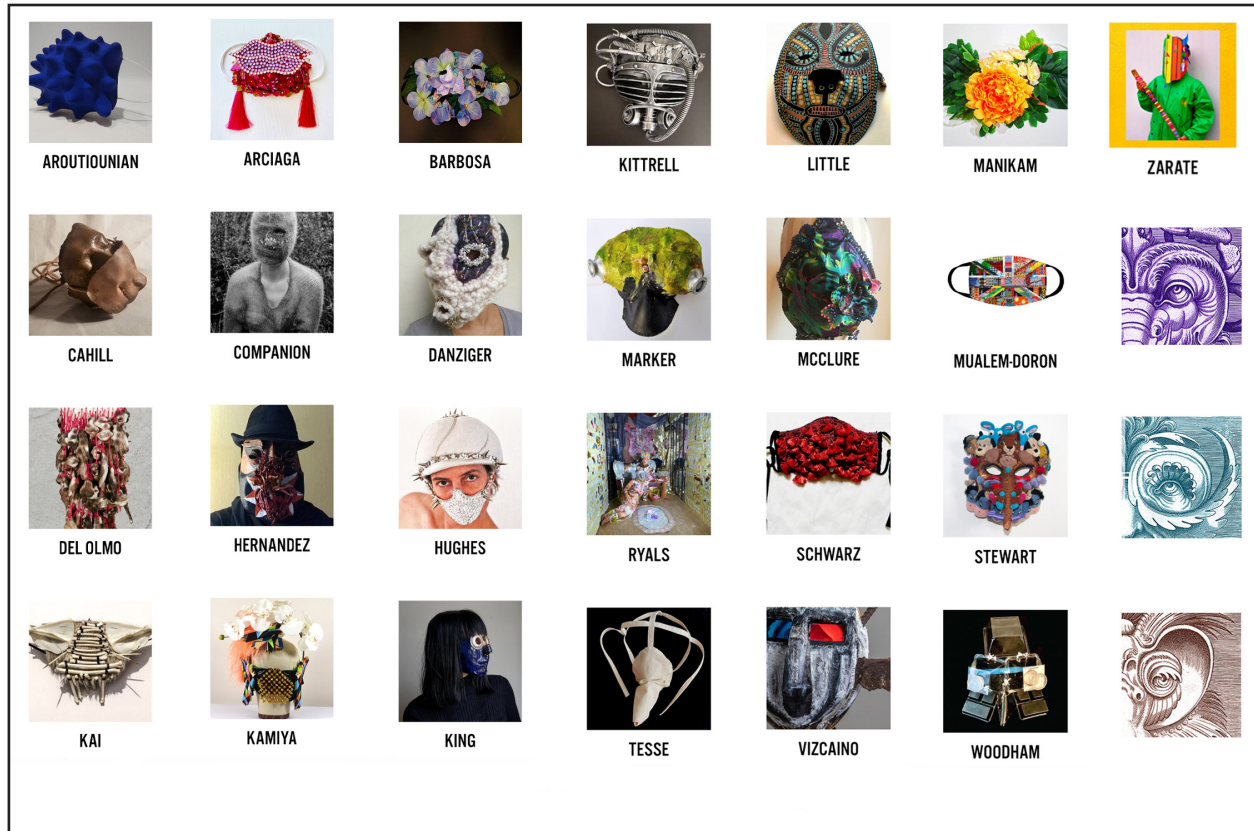
## ON THE FUTURE OF *THE BABEL MASKS* AND THE LIBRARIAN OF BABEL

**MKH:** Where has the exhibition travelled, and what are the future plans for this particular exhibit (if any)?

**PB:** As of now, a year after the call was put out, the original exhibition is done. The artists have generously participated in subsequent events and have allowed their work to be re-shown at the American Heritage Collage. Some of them have done video interviews and all of them contributed to the print catalog. I think that it is good to let an exhibit have an arc: a beginning and an ending. It was a complicated journey and I feel very grateful to the artists for giving their time and their art to this exhibition. It would be a pleasure to work with any one of them in the future.

**MKH:** Can you briefly describe your future projects with, and hopes for, *The Librarian of Babel* overall?

**PB:** After working on *Babel Masks* for a year, I am on hiatus from developing new projects. So I don't know what will be next, but the next idea will arrive because it has to. It could be literally anything. I was very surprised at the complete and interlocking suite of projects that came out of the simple idea that a collection of masks deserved to be exhibited. So I am leaving a space wide open for serendipity.



**FIGURE 3** ARTIST IMAGES COMPILED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE LIBRARIAN OF BABEL, THE BABEL MASKS, 2022 (WWW.BABELMASKS.COM). CLIPART OF MASKS DESIGNED BY CORNELIUS FLORIS, AND ENGRAVED BY FRANS HOYS, 1555, REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE LIBRARIAN OF BABEL, THE BABEL MASKS, 20 (WWW.BABELMASKS.COM).

*To view *The Babel Masks* exhibit, please visit: [www.babelmasks.com](http://www.babelmasks.com), or see highlights from the show on Instagram at [@babelmasks](https://www.instagram.com/babelmasks)*

*To learn more about Paula Billups and her work, please visit: [www.paulabillups.com](http://www.paulabillups.com).*

## Author Bio



Paula Billups is an artist and a teacher with a studio practice spanning twenty years.

Most recently, she directed the 2020 show *The Babel Masks*, featuring an international group of twenty-five artists in an online exhibition, a series of YouTube interviews, and a print catalog. Ms. Billups received her BFA in Painting from the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts, in Connecticut, and her MFA in Creative Practice from the Transart Institute in Berlin. Learn more about her work at [www.paulabillups.com](http://www.paulabillups.com).



Megan K. Hughes is an M.A. Fashion candidate, and Contract Lecturer, at Toronto Metropolitan University.

See her writing in this edition of *Fashion Studies*, as well as the June 2022 issue of *Fashion Theory*, and her millinery work at [www.mkhmillinery.com](http://www.mkhmillinery.com).

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