

ART & DESIGN

Lost in the Gallery-Industrial Complex

Holland Cotter Looks at Money in Art

By **HOLLAND COTTER** JAN. 17, 2014

A new year. A new New York mayor. Old problems with art in New York. I have a collection of complaints and a few (very few) ideas for change.

Money — the grotesque amounts spent, the inequitable distribution — has dominated talk about art in the 21st century so far. It's a basic fact of art history. Emperors, popes and robber barons set the model for the billionaire buyers of today. Of course, it is today that matters to the thousands of artists who live and work in this punitively expensive city, where the art industry is often confused with the art world.

The distinction between the two, though porous, is real. The art industry is the nexus of high-price galleries, auction houses and collectors who control an art market renowned for its funny-money practices. In numbers of personnel, the industry is a mere subset of the circle of artists, teachers, students, writers, curators and middle-range dealers spread out over five boroughs. But in terms of power, the proportions are reversed, to the degree that the art world basically functions as a labor source, supplying the industry with product, services and exotic color but, with the age of apprenticeships

long gone, only uncertainly sharing in its wealth.

Do I exaggerate? A bit. The argument can be made that labor is benefiting from its ties to management, in a high-tide-floats-all-boats way. Visit art schools or galleries, and you get the impression that a substantial portion of the art world is content to serve as support staff to a global ruling class.

The reality is that, directly or indirectly, in large ways and small, the current market system is shaping every aspect of art in the city: not just how artists live, but also what kind of art is made, and how art is presented in the media and in museums.

I got tired of money talk a while back. Rather than just sputter with indignation, I figured it would be more useful to turn in another direction, toward art that the industry wasn't looking at, which is a whole lot of art. But reminders keep pulling you back to the bottom line. With every visit to the gallery-packed Lower East Side, I see fewer of the working-class Latinos who once called the neighborhood home. In what feels like overnight, I've watched Dumbo in Brooklyn go from an artist's refuge to an economically gated community.

Recently, my attention was drawn to a controversy surrounding a large and much praised group exhibition installed at a complex of converted warehouses called Industry City in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The show, "Come Together: Surviving Sandy," was conceived as a benefit for artists who had suffered losses in the 2012 hurricane and was promoted as evidence of art-world solidarity. Yet a widely read blog, Art F City, reported that the owners of the complex, which had for some years provided low-rent studios for artists, were now raising rents dramatically, forcing many artists to vacate. (Landlords say 25 percent of Industry City tenants are artists). The new residents seem to be an upscale clientele drawn by the artsy atmosphere.

Whatever the full facts, money is the winner, and with that comes caution and conservatism. This is almost absurdly obvious on the high-end of the

market. Sales of retrograde “masterworks” can be relied on to jack up the auction charts at regular intervals; the most recent record was set last fall by a \$142.4 million Francis Bacon painting of Lucian Freud, a monument to two overpraised painters for the price of one. Meanwhile, big, hugely pricey tchotchkes — new whatevers by Jeff Koons, say — roll out of fabrication shops and into personal museums being assembled by members of the international power elite.

Outside auctions, the marketing mechanics buzz on. Roughly since the end of the multicultural, postmodern 1990s, we’ve watched new art being re-Modernized and domesticated, with painting the medium of choice, abstraction the mode of preference. Together they offer significant advantages. Paintings can be assembly-line produced but still carry the aura of being hand-touched. They can be tailored to small spaces, such as fair booths. Abstraction, especially if color is involved, can establish instant eye contact from afar. If, in addition, the work’s graphic impact translates well online, where stock can be moved eBay style, so much the better.

Other traditional forms — drawing, photography, some sculpture — similarly work well in this marketing context. But an enormous range of art does not, beginning with film, performance and installation, and extending into rich realms of creative activity that defy classification as art at all. To note this dynamic is not to dismiss painting or object making, but to point to the restrictive range of art that the market supports, that dealers are encouraged to sell, and that artists are encouraged to make.

The narrowing of the market has been successful in attracting a wave of neophyte buyers who have made art shopping chic. It has also produced an epidemic of copycat collecting. To judge by the amounts of money piled up on a tiny handful of reputations, few of these collectors have the guts, or the eye or the interest, to venture far from blue-chip boilerplate. They let galleries, art advisers and the media do the choosing, and the media doesn’t particularly include art critics. What, after all, does thumbs up, thumbs down matter when

winners are preselected before the critical votes are in? In this economy, it can appear that the critic's job is to broadcast names and contribute to fame.

Conservative art can encourage conservative criticism. We're seeing a revival — some would say a disinterment — of a describe-the-strokes style of writing popular in the formalist 1950s and again in the 1970s: basically, glorified advertising copy. Evaluative approaches that developed in the 1980s and 1990s, based on the assumption that art inevitably comments on the social and political realities that produce it, tend to be met with disparagement now, in part because they're often couched in academic jargon, which has become yet another form of sales-speak.

There's no question that we need — art needs — an influx of new commentators who don't mistake attitude for ideas, who move easily between cultures and geographies. Regular gigs in mainstream print journalism have all but dried up, but the Internet offers ambitious options in a growing number of blogazines including *Art F City* (edited by Paddy Johnson) and *Hyperallergic* (edited by Hrag Vartanian), which combine criticism, reporting, political activism and gossip on an almost-24-hour news cycle.

And although both are based in New York, they include national coverage and in a feisty mix of voices, a welcome alternative to the one-personality blog of yore. That mix would probably be even more varied, and transcultural, if a few forward-thinking, art-minded investors would infuse some serious capital into such enterprises so they could pay writers a living wage and make online freelance writing a viable way of life.

I don't know what it would take to get a global mix of voices into some of New York's big, rich art museums. If archaeologists of the future unearthed the Museum of Modern Art as it exists today, they would have to assume that Modernism was a purely European and North American invention. They would be wrong. Modernism was, and is, an international phenomenon, happening in different ways, on different timetables, for different reasons in

Africa, Asia, Australia and South America.

Why aren't museums telling that story? Because it doesn't sell. Why doesn't it sell? Because it's unfamiliar. Why is it unfamiliar? Because museums, with their eyes glued to box office, aren't telling the story.

Yes, MoMA and the Guggenheim have recently organized a few “non-Western” shows. MoMA's 2012 “Tokyo 1955-1970: A New Avant-Garde,” packed to the ceiling with art we've rarely if ever seen, was a revelation. But they need to take actions far more fundamental and committed. International Modernism should be fully integrated into the permanent collection, regularly, consistently.

Their job as public institutions is to change our habits of thinking and seeing. One way to do this is by bringing disparate cultures together in the same room, on the same wall, side by side. This sends two vital, accurate messages: that all these cultures are different but equally valuable; and all these cultures are also alike in essential ways, as becomes clear with exposure.

With its recently announced plans for an expansion, MoMA has an ideal chance to expand its horizons organically. The new spaces, which should certainly be devoted to the permanent collection, won't be ready for several years, but the museum has no excuse for waiting for its long-overdue integration process to begin.

And on the subject of integration, why, in one of the most ethnically diverse cities, does the art world continue to be a bastion of whiteness? Why are African-American curators and administrators, and especially directors, all but absent from our big museums? Why are there still so few black — and Latino, and Asian-American — critics and editors?

Not long ago, these questions — of policy but also political and ethical questions — seemed to be out there on institutional tables, demanding discussion. Technically, they may be there still, but museums seem to be most

interested in talking about real estate, assiduously courting oligarchs for collections, and anxiously scouting for the next “Rain Room.” Political questions, about which cultures get represented in museums and who gets to make the decisions, and how, are buried.

Political art brings me back to where I started, with artists, and one final, baffled complaint, this one about art schools, which seem, in their present form, designed to accommodate the general art economy and its competitive, caste-system values. Programs are increasingly specialized, jamming students into ever narrower and flakier disciplinary tracks. Tuitions are prodigious, leaving artists indentured to creditors for years.

How experimental can artists be under such circumstances? How confidently can they take risks in an environment that acknowledges only dollar-value success? How can they contemplate sustaining — to me this is crucial to New York’s future as an art center — long and evolving creative careers? The temptation for many artists, after a postgraduate spurt of confidence, is to look around, see what’s selling, and consider riffing on that. We’re seeing a depressing number of such riffs these days.

Again, do I exaggerate? And, again, sure, to some degree. By no means is all the news bad. Start-up galleries are opening; middle-tier galleries are holding their own, or doing better than that. Artist-intensive neighborhoods like Bushwick and Ridgewood are still affordable, companionable and fun.

But when the rents get too high, or the economy fails, or art buying falls out of fashion, and the art industry decides to liquidate its overvalued assets and leave? Artists, the first and last stakeholders, will have themselves to fall back on. They’ll learn to organize and agitate for what they need, to let City Hall know, in no uncertain terms, that they’re there. They’ll learn to share, not just on special occasions, but all the time. They’ll learn that art and politics are inseparable, and both can be anything and everything. They’ll learn to bring art back from the brink of inconsequence.

As someone long on questions and short on answers, let me ask: Why not start now?

A version of this article appears in print on January 19, 2014, on page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Lost in the Gallery-Industrial Complex.

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