

## Contemporary Art's Pyrrhic Triumph

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The Swatch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2011. Photo JS

In the last twenty years, contemporary art has undergone an extraordinary transformation. Where once it was a small and specialist world, concentrated in a few cosmopolitan cities and of limited public appeal, now its market and audience have grown massively, and it can make a plausible claim to have become global. Governments have responded to the change, establishing contemporary art galleries and museums in provincial cities where previously the art world would have had no business, while the globalisation of the art world has been driven by state-aided biennials, which were founded, first by the dozen and then by the hundred, in the years following the collapse of Eastern European Communism.

That growth has been driven by a mix of rising inequality, globalisation, speculation and government intervention. Inequality is the hallmark of neoliberalism, the unrestrained form of capitalism pioneered by Reagan, Thatcher and Pinochet from the 1970s onwards, and most nations have become steadily more unequal ever since. The more very rich people there are, the more it increases the pool of those capable of buying contemporary art. Collecting such art has become one of the ways that the super-rich conspicuously consume, as it is used to decorate

their many properties, and sits alongside other trophy possessions such as yachts, private jets and football teams. Yet, previously few of the very wealthy believed that owning contemporary art was a worthwhile means of gaining social cachet, so there has been a cultural as well as an economic shift. The hold of classical culture (and with it, the aspiration of the rich to ape or preferably become members of the aristocracy) has faded. Knowledge of classical culture is an increasingly obscure social adornment, and it is unsuited to the global reach of the business concerns from which the elite gain their wealth. Contemporary art, with its shallow historical referencing, shiny modernity, global consciousness, and global recognisability as 'art' is far more apt.

Speculative buying of contemporary art is another major reason for the growth of the market. In the boom years from the early 2000s up until 2008, the usual calculation changed: investors had made money from contemporary art but on average less than they would have made in stocks and shares (and that cost to the owner was expressed in the prestige of ownership); but in those fevered years, even short-term investments in young artists outperformed the stock market, and pure investors flooded in. Even now, when in the West the hottest investments of the previous period have crashed, and when the global volume of contemporary art sold at auction declined by well over half, speculative money continues to shape the market in the Far East.

Government intervention and the power of publicity shape both the market and the audiences for art. The state helps to found art fairs and biennials, providing the places where art can be seen, and the centres in which business can be done. Museum display sanctions products in a market where otherwise it is remarkably difficult to gain transparent information about value (private galleries guard their monopolies and set prices arbitrarily, and the auction world is known for price fixing and other strategies which distort the market). Publicity—and with it the lubricious culture of celebrity—follows the money, but the reverse is also true. Artists, collectors, curators and even dealers appear in the popular press. So there is a symbiosis between biennial, art fair, museum and private gallery, just as there is between headline-grabbing auction prices and the market for gossip.

That so many people now choose to look at contemporary art is doubtless partly due to its greater accessibility in biennials and museums, and to its greater media exposure. The major museums exploit the new situation by becoming branded spaces, offering reliable art experiences in the zones between showcase circulation and corporate entertainment spaces, cafes and gift shops. Tate, to take the leading example in this, now offers an environment as distinctly recognisable and assuring as that of Starbucks. Branded artists comfortably inhabit branded spaces, each back-slapping the other. The historical avant gardes are repurposed in exhibitions that invent them as brands, playing down their contrarian, negatory and critical elements in a warm and viscous narrative in which everything is equally recommended.

So contemporary art, in a manner entirely unanticipated by its vanguard inventors, has found its home within global corporate culture, and has triumphed in capturing the attention and the cash of some of its most prominent stars. Yet there are tensions in this scene of cosy co-existence between state, business and culture. Regarding the market, since contemporary art is tied directly to the success of neoliberal capital, its vulnerabilities are those of the system as a whole, as was amply demonstrated in the crash of 2008. The tide of speculative investment has raised uncomfortable questions about the conduct of the private art market in which—to take just one example—‘insider trading’ is simply the standard business model. More fundamentally, while the film and music industries have been utterly transformed by digitisation, the art market holds tightly to its archaic practices. Many—even most—art works have at least a digital stage in their manufacture, and many are in essence digital artefacts. Video art used to be very difficult to teach because the tapes and DVDs were locked away by artists, galleries and museums; now vast amounts circulate online, especially on YouTube. How can the convention of the limited photographic print survive when the file from which it was made can be copied and sent at virtually no cost?

Regarding viewers, the very triumph of contemporary art undermines it, as it becomes official culture, a mere outcrop of the corporate demand that we all strive individually for creativity and ‘excellence’. Following the oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, protestors targeted Tate and other cultural bodies in an attempt to save art from the taint of BP. A Sotheby’s contemporary art auction was invaded by activists objecting to this ‘Orgy of the Rich’. At least since the rise of the avant garde, art has promised its makers and viewers freedom from the instrumental demands of work and standardised mass culture. The more art meets the demands of business, governments and the super-rich, the more the promise of that freedom falters.

Art is subject to a double protection. In the market, it is shielded from unwarranted treatment through controlled ownership. In the museum world, experts decide what should be seen, alongside what, with what interpretation and in what circumstances. A wide public is courted but allowed no power over what it sees. The very ethos of this culture—of exclusivity, elitism and control—is now at odds with the culture people make themselves. As the communications apparatus that drove globalisation become available to consumers, as vast servers and fast data lines allow people to make and publicly show their work, it becomes obvious that making things that look much like ‘contemporary art’ is not that difficult.