

Money Making Ideas

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Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2009.

This book about price, value, celebrity, and the merging of work and one's entire identity comes at a propitious time. Largely written at the height of the speculative bubble for contemporary art, it issues into an utterly changed scene that may offer a sharp perspective on what for so long appeared to be merely business as usual. Price and fame were certainly closely tied: as the author notes, since the financial crisis, reporting on the art world in the lifestyle press almost ceased.

Isabelle Graw is well known as an art critic, a founder of *Texte zur Kunst* and an academic author. One of the key claims of this book is that artists are the prototypes of celebrities, and that as all service-industry workers are expected to act creatively—more like artists—they must throw their entire lives as image onto the market. Graw, as an insider, is clear that she does this herself: when in 2007 the German *Vanity Fair* summoned the Frankfurt art scene to a photo shoot 'everyone (me included) turned up on time, and perfectly styled.' Graw's author picture in which she presents the reader with a foxy tilt of the head and a dazzling smile is another conscious piece of artistic self-presentation. The view from the inside has definite advantages, and the book contains much insight, along with many telling details and anecdotes. Graw also ranges into realms far beyond the usual postmodern clichés in the Anglo-American art literature, taking in aspects of Marxism, Italian autonomism, German sociological thinking about culture, the market and networking, and specific interests in French theory, notably Foucault on biopolitics, and Boltanski and Chiapello on the artistic character of contemporary capitalism. Yet it may be that views from the inside, despite their many advantages, also tend to exemplify as much as analyse the contradictions of their subject.

A key to analysing the relation between art and its market is to describe the distinctiveness of art as a commodity, which might explain the extraordinary social cachet that attaches to its ownership. Graw offers three main criteria: art's uniqueness (or at least rarity in limited editions), its durability and resistance to fashion, and its carrying 'intellectual surplus value'—a set of meanings. The first two are plainly more matters of degree than principle: monopoly through the marketing of unique or rare goods are regularly strived for in many markets, and are particularly features of land, real estate and some antiques (Fabergé eggs, for example). Considerable social distinction may be gained from the ownership of these goods. Durability is also exhibited by antiques, while art-world reputations are subject to cycles of fashion in which reputations rise or, more regularly, fall, as a survey of the covers of back issues of *Artforum* will swiftly confirm.

'Intellectual surplus value' is another matter. A particularly clear case is offered by Graw in her discussion of Damien Hirst bringing his own works directly to auction in 2008: through this action, Hirst seems to be saying that it is pointless to make anything other than objects for speculation, and declaring his own artistic bankruptcy; but equally, he is also commenting on the identity of market

and art, so making a conceptual point that stands outside the market. The ‘surplus’ here seems to be that any artistic statement may also be taken as a meta-statement, and so adopt a useful paradoxical status. The situation bears comparison with the foundational paradox that plagued Bertrand Russell (is the set of all sets a member of itself?), and which can only be solved by finding a way to rule out the infinite regression of meta-statements.

While the idea of this ‘surplus’ is taken from Marx, there are clear differences with his concept of surplus value. For Graw, the surplus is a surplus only because it stands outside the market, while for Marx it can only be realised by a sale in the market. In Graw, too, it is unclear whether this is an exploitative relation. Who are the workers who labour longer than is necessary to sustain themselves, who the capitalists who profit from that extra labour? In an extraordinary passage from the *Grundrisse*, Marx points to a model of work set against the extraction of surplus value:

The Times of November 1857 contains an utterly delightful cry of outrage on the part of a West-Indian plantation owner. This advocate analyses with great moral indignation—as a plea for the re-introduction of Negro slavery—how the *Quashees* (the free blacks of Jamaica) content themselves with producing only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption, and, alongside this ‘use value’, regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good; how they do not care a damn for the sugar and the fixed capital invested in the plantations, but rather observe the planters’ impending bankruptcy with an ironic grin of malicious pleasure...

There is an irony, too, that what Marx is describing here is also an ideal model of the artist’s labour, which should be free, self-fulfilling and self-determined, a glimpse of the utopia that awaits all mankind after the final synthesis. Elsewhere, Graw revealingly describes the demands made on artists by dealers (for example, to more regularly produce new work for art fairs), so ‘surplus’ may be an apposite term after all.

There is a decided oscillation in Graw’s thinking about the status of the intellectual surplus, which is also contained in art-world discourse; she points out that the most effective way to market something is to claim its transcendence of the market. Sometimes the surplus is simply thought to exist in the art works themselves: this is particularly evident in discussion of prices that are thought excessive (an example for Graw is Gursky’s photographs) and other market ‘errors’ of valuation which strongly imply that there is an inherent quality that can be judged independently of price. She writes: ‘Even insiders who should really know better cannot help discovering artistic merit in the work of commercially successful artists.’ Graw even claims that is not enough to dismiss the belief system of idealist aesthetics, including the claim to autonomy, because it has ‘a basis in artistic praxis.’ This is exactly like saying that one cannot dismiss the existence of God because the church behaves as if He exists. At other points, however, Graw writes that ‘The notion that art has some inherent value is the central (and most productive) illusion of the art market’, and in this case value is seen as a product of networking relations, in which ‘because the value of an artwork stands on clay feet, it must be the subject of endless communication.’

If the creation of value (market and otherwise) is a network relation, this does not mean that qualities of the work—condition and conservation issues, expense of materials, size and rarity—do not have a bearing on people’s opinions any more than that the stock market price for coffee is insulated from weather patterns. The relation is indirect, always mediated through opinion, and in the case of ‘intellectual surplus’, it is a question of how the opinions of those that create intellectual surplus, mostly art critics and art historians, are viewed by those who create market value. These opinions, unlike the weather, may be manipulated and purchased.

Graw’s analysis of the relation between market and symbolic value is not a static one. She draws on the work of Boltanski and Chiapello, Hardt and Negri, Virno and others to describe the ways in which the lines of capitalist creative labour and artistic work converge; how artists and other workers remake themselves as celebrities, self-publicists and networkers; and how the work of art becomes less and less distinguishable from branded luxury goods. The art market has become modernised, and its businesses franchised and branded. The old loyalties between dealer and artist are eroded from both sides as stars leave for more prominent galleries, and the economic protection once offered by the gallery devoted to a particular kind of art has almost vanished. Just as Warhol’s obsession with fashion and celebrity-chasing once damaged his reputation but now seems standard behaviour, Larry Gagosian, whose aggressive business practices were once the subject of disdain, is now ‘universally respected and admired’. In these changes, some of the latent potentials of art reach full realisation, for the art work is the prototypical branded commodity, and the artist the prototypical celebrity and professional networker. Yet they also damage other qualities of art as its autonomy is undermined and forced into limited areas.

Graw rightly says that art’s main use is its apparent uselessness. In its modernisation, the art world threatens to undermine the core function of its product. The more the market seizes on intellectual production to bolster market value (and she points to the hiring of in-house art historians to boost the reputation of commercially successful but critically neglected artists such as John Currin, along with collectors buying stakes in publishing houses that specialise in theory, and funding monographs), the more the intellectual surplus appears as mere publicity, and the more sceptically it is received.

In the setting of the art market’s rationalisation, enlargement and globalisation, the principle of art’s uselessness becomes a more visible anomaly. While Graw wants to hold onto a limited idea of artistic autonomy, it is Warhol’s dollars and Hirst’s skull—art appearing as money—that haunt this book. The very idea of a market ‘error’, on which the distinction between market value and intellectual value is based, is an unsustainable one. If, following the financial crisis, the price of an artist falls by a half, it is not that the previous price was an error, merely that buyers’ views about the market value has changed. If the idea of an autonomous intellectual surplus is illusory, the eroding of the conditions that sustain that illusion can only be welcomed.