

The Fracturing of Globalisation

The World

The art world really became a world following the collapse of Eastern European Communism from 1989 onwards. Biennials sprouted in new markets across the globe, artists from Asia, Africa and South America began to appear in exhibitions in significant numbers, contemporary art scenes evolved outside the US, Japan and Europe, and it became plausible to conceive of the art world less as a constellation of fixed centres and more as a series of flows from one locale to another, accompanied by flocks of private jets. Yet lately, the comfortingly multicultural scene that emerged has been subject to serious political and economic stresses, which have already sufficiently disturbed that world to have produced within it some very strange phenomena, and which threaten to break it apart entirely.

‘Globalisation’ is, of course, a complex and much contested term, but for our purposes it can be taken to mean the consequences of the freer circulation of money, investment and goods (but not, at least officially, of labour), and of the unequal international trade and legal agreements that regulated that freedom. Space seemed to shrink as rapid travel became cheaper, and especially through the wider availability of data communication systems, phones and the Internet. In its much-publicised utopian moment, the globe became a universal play-area for the mega-rich and for multinational capital. But globalisation also encompasses the multicultural slums of the world’s mega-cities; the trade in human and animal bodies, and in pollution; the increasingly widespread ruination of the environment; and indentured or even slave labour. So it encompasses the greatest freedom and the greatest oppression, each structurally bound to its opposite.

Globalisation was also aligned with neoliberal politics and economics (this despite the nationalist rhetoric of neoliberal governments—of Thatcher, Reagan and Pinochet—which was a mask for the radical erosion of national economies and cultures). So globalisation in part caused, and was accompanied by, the familiar effects of neoliberal political and economic policies: the elevation of finance and service economies over industry, rising inequality, the decline of the labour movements, and the emergence of a large and structural mass of the under- and unemployed.

Until very recently, there were good reasons to think that the globalisation of the art world had its limits, and did not fully reflect the general globalisation of the economy. The dominance of the New York art scene was one factor here: while many artists from China, Brazil, South Africa, Russia and Cuba became prominent, many of them also ended up living and working in New York. The US, and New York in particular, dominated the buying and selling of contemporary art, and as a consequence much of the language and terms of its reception.

In the last few years, however, there have been profound and very rapid commercial changes, particularly in the rise of Chinese, Indian, Russian art, and with it of indigenous markets. There has been a five-fold increase in the size of the Indian contemporary art market in a few years; and a ten-fold increase in average auction prices achieved for Indian art between 2004 and 2008.¹ Of the top ten auction prices for contemporary art in

¹ *Le Marché de l'Art Contemporain 2007/8*, Artprice.com SA, Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or 2008, p. 126.

2007-8, three went to Chinese artists—Cai Guoqiang, Zeng Fanzhi and Liu Xiaodong. Data on the best prices achieved in first sales at auction in 2007 (thus focusing on young artists) show that nearly three-quarters of the top fifty are Chinese, and (in a sense, more importantly) that over half their sales were made in China.² As remarkably, in the annual turnover of contemporary art at auction, in 2007-8, China came within a hair's breadth of overtaking the UK, for long the second-largest market, and this development has taken place with breath-taking rapidity. The comparative dominance of the US has declined, in line with its deeply troubled economy and the decreasing global hold of its ideological model. In the remarkable speculative fever that gripped the contemporary art world in the last five years, the promise of globalisation was finally reflected in the market.

This globalisation of the art world has in large part been propagated by the rise of the biennial. Here, ideally at least, the virtues of cultural hybridity and mobility are promoted through works of art and acts of curation that should erode fixed values and ideals, including national political attachments and Enlightenment principles (given their haunting by colonialism, the Holocaust and the Gulag). Much of the work shown at biennials exploits the charge produced by cultural splicing—socialist realism meets Disney, for instance, though the examples could be effortlessly multiplied. The positive message of the biennial, again ideally, gestures towards the emergence, through the intermixing of cultures, of a global consciousness in which all voices can be heard.

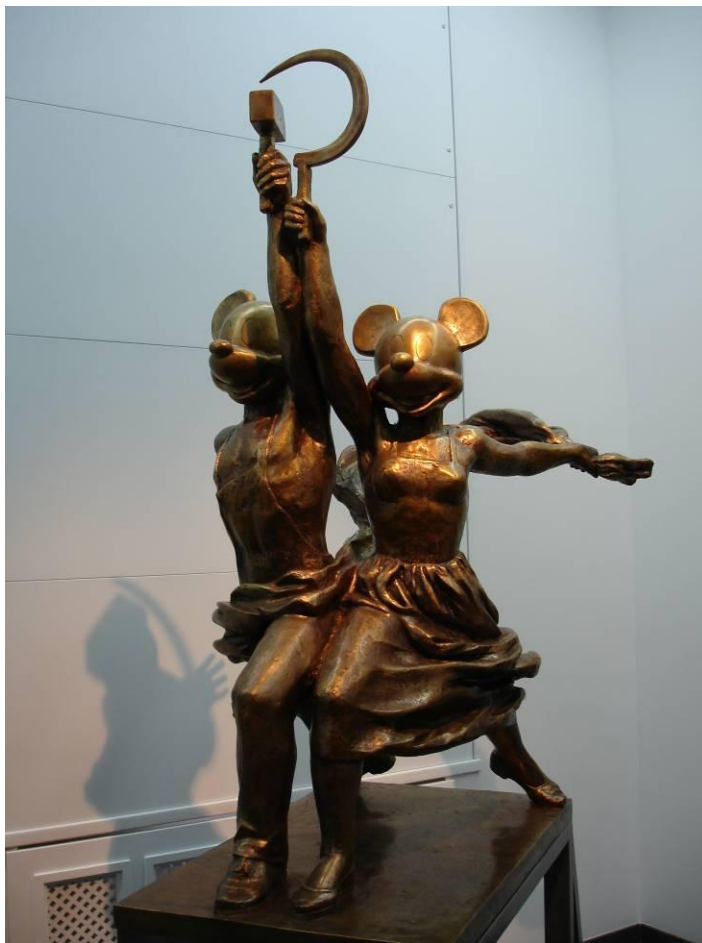


Figure 1: Alexander Kosolapov, *Mickey and Minnie: The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman*, 2004-5, as shown at the Moscow Biennial, 2007

² *Le Marché de l'Art Contemporain 2007/8*, p. 133.

The hybrid art itself, like the spread of pigeons or rats, forces the local species into narrow and insecure ecological niches. In its shuffling of familiar post-conceptual devices and readily recognisable national symbols and concerns into an endless parade of novel combinations, it remains identified with its nation of origin. Fredric Jameson's well-known remarks about Third World literature being condemned to appear as an allegory of nation, still applies to its art, but also to that of post-Communist states, and increasingly to the art of the 'developed' world, too, when it is seized on by marketers for whom national identification is used as a convenient pre-existing brand.³ Even when the work is not manifestly national-allegorical, it often gets read as such, urged along by interpretation material that insists on national identification, including those labels for works that include the artist's nation of origin. At first sight, this insistence on nation-labelling may appear to cut against the ideals of hybridity, but it celebrates the broadening ambit of neoliberal hybridity, the induction of culture after culture into the realm of free exchange, where a new set of cultural tokens become available for combination and trade.



Figure 2: Antonio Muntadas's *Giardini*, 2005

That the process is far from complete was the point of a work by Antonio Muntadas for the Venice Biennale of 2005, entitled *Giardini*: a double-sided lightbox, it showed on one face photographs of all the Biennale's national pavilions, and on the reverse, a list—rather extensive—of all nations that do not show at Venice.

While the ideals of the biennial are politically liberal, they also are economically neoliberal—the scepticism towards all ideals that might establish barriers to global exchange, the denigration of the national, and the implicit endorsement through lack of critique of the 'natural' environment of the unfettered market. In its conventional

³ Fredric Jameson 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, vol. 15, 1986, pp. 65–88.

recommendation of these neoliberal virtues, the art world celebrates as freedom all that is forced upon us.

Since the cultural politics of that world is in contradiction with its economic basis (or to be more precise, the economics of its production and consumption is in contradiction with the political outlook of the large majority of its viewers, if not owners), these neoliberal virtues have to hide themselves, and this concealment leads to a good deal of obfuscation in both works of art and the literature that might otherwise elucidate them.

There are, however, aspects of the art-world celebration of globalisation that, beyond the irreducibly contradictory nature of globalisation itself, tend to undermine the idealism of the Biennial, and lead the viewer to critical thinking. There is the familiar critique of the easily recognisable standard character of 'Biennial art', with its spectacular inflation of size, gestures towards political themes, and fairground air—products of hasty overproduction and the courting of easy controversy. There is the paradox, analysed by Elena Filipovic, that while the Biennial is supposed to celebrate the local and the contingent, the standard international-style white cube continues to reign as the wrapping in which the various products are offered.⁴ There is the often-transparent character of the Biennial in boosting the fortunes of some city or region in its efforts at gentrification, and in supporting—or even establishing—the local art market. The funding of these necessarily expensive collections of shows produces further visible instrumentalism which sits uneasily with the pure ideals of the Biennial, from sponsorship (branded rest areas, for example) to the merchandising of the event itself through the sale of souvenir mugs and other knick-knacks.



Figure 3: Documenta 12 merchandise

⁴ Elena Filipovic, 'The Global White Cube', in Barbara Vanderlinden/ Elena Filipovic, eds., *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, pp. 63-84.

Above all, however, the lure and trap of money mocks the liberal ideal of the Biennial and the globalisation of the art world generally. A central aspect of neoliberalism is the rise of inequality, with the long growth in the fortunes of the wealthy and especially the super-rich at the expense, not merely of the poorest, but of an increasingly large section of wage-earners, whose income has been declining now for decades.⁵ The art world is one arena for the global super-rich elite to pursue their conspicuous expenditure. Their increasingly extravagant ways of marking themselves out from one another with gigantic yachts, private jets and helicopters, and vast mansions are of a piece with the love a proportion of them profess for art. As Joseph Bachstein, co-ordinator of the Moscow Biennial, wrote of the rise of the Russian collector:

What is a rich Russian? It means you must have an apartment in Moscow, a Bentley, a dacha on Rublyovka, a house in London, a villa in Sardinia, and a yacht. Then you must buy modern art.⁶

Sarah Thornton describes the hundred private jets that touch down in Basel for the art fair, and the fine gradings of socio-cultural rankings for those jostling for position at Venice, where for some dealers the poolside of the Cipriani is their informal office.⁷ What is purchased through participation in the art world, through collecting or patronage, is not merely or even primarily things but access to a certain social set, a type of quasi-intellectual discourse, and a particular form of social cachet—this is Bourdieu in practice.⁸ That art which has made personal interaction its metier merely formalises this arrangement by providing the opportunity for the global elite (already homogenised through wealth and cosmopolitanism) eccentric opportunities for socialising.

There is another kind of tie to money, which is relatively new (and now endangered): art as a pure investment—especially as a hedge against the downward movement of other types of investment. It is this development which explains art's relative buoyancy in the downturn, and why the situation in the art world seems a bit better than, for example, in the British property market or the US car market. There is generally a cost to owning art, which performs less well in gaining value than stocks and shares, and which is costly to insure, conserve and sell. That cost is part of the basis for its social cachet. The contemporary art bubble of the past five or so years changed that calculation, and instrumental investors moved in. One result has been the rapid lionisation of young artists, since they offer the greatest opportunities for successful speculation. There was a frenzy to be in on the investment opportunity that the rising art market presented: during the run of the PS1 exhibition, *Greater New York*, in 2005, which showed a large number of younger artists, those mentioned favourably in the press had queues of potential buyers outside their studios the following day.

The concerted manipulation of prices by hedge-fund traders, who have carefully chosen artists who they consider to be under-valued (whose prices are comparatively low but are held in prestigious collections and have a good critical reputation) have caused rapid and spectacular rises in the prices of some artists--Richard Prince being a model example.⁹

⁵ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

⁶ As quoted in Sophia Kishkovsky, 'Moscow Biennale Pokes Fun at Consumers and Politicians', *New York Times*, 10 March 2007.

⁷ Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, Granta, London 2008, pp. 78, 224, and chs. 3 and 7.

⁸ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice trans., Routledge, London 1984.

⁹ See Molly Concannon, *Collecting Richard Prince: Strategies of a New Type of Investor in the Contemporary Market*, MA Dissertation, University of London (Courtauld Institute of Art), 2005, passim.

Small groups of dealers and collectors also conspire to gather large amounts of an artist's work and drive up the price by bidding way over the odds for his or her work at auction.¹⁰

The art boom, now recognised as a bubble, has tended to produce a particular kind of work: spectacular objects that serve well as conversation pieces in the living rooms of billionaires. The focus on money, prestige and celebrity is in tension with the qualities of art that make it most valuable to that very elite, for it should gesture towards the higher realm of autonomous action and absolute, individual freedom, and not to the grubby world of the bottom line (Damien Hirst, in recent works, including his notorious diamond-encrusted skull, almost makes this a theme). Thus art may be seen as a paragon of globalised culture, in which the lingua franca is not American, and not even the English language, but simply money.

The Break

The years of the art investment boom were also those of the 'war on terror'. While the excesses of the boom mocked the political ideals of cultural globalisation, the war on terror—summed up in President Bush's position that you are either for us or against us—was a more direct assault. On both sides, after all, this was a way of dividing the world between terrorist and soldier, religious fanatic and true believer, those who love death and those who love life. The invasions, kidnappings, beheadings, murders, torture, extra-legal imprisonment, and the bombing of civilians (whether with home-made explosives or million-dollar missiles), much of it captured on photography and video for propaganda purposes, were the products of that division as it fractured the globalised ideal.

Multiculturalism itself came under attack, and the drawbacks as well as the virtues of hybrid mixing became evident. In the UK, this was illustrated graphically with British-born suicide bombers, an event that helped to bring about a volte face in state policy towards multiculturalism. There was a confrontation here with others who were truly other, who were uninterested in swapping stories or recipes, and wanted only the death of apostates and the destruction of their culture.¹¹ With that confrontation came a widespread demonisation of a broad swathe of culture and religion.

At the same time, 'we' also became unrecognisable in our fundamentalism. The US and its allies behaved in ways that were as alien to our purported values as were the acts of our enemies. Did we really have our agents snatch people from streets to be interned indefinitely in secret torture centres? Did we really imprison their children to extort information from prisoners? Even the new administration, acting on the intelligence of the whereabouts of some Al Qaida suspect, delivers a bomb to that location by pilotless drone. How is that morally different from detonating a truck bomb at a political parade?

In this, the (neo)liberal art world finds it hard to place itself: it can comfortably attack US neoconservative fundamentalism as a barrier to free flows of trade and culture, and does so often. More rarely, it can register the full extent of Western brutality. Can it also bring itself to attack Islamic fundamentalism? Or the broader cultural and religious

¹⁰ Marc Spiegler, 'Is the Art Market the "New Economy"', in Margriet Schavemaker/ Mischa Rakier, eds., *Right About Now: Art and Theory Since the 1990s*, Valiz Publishers, Amsterdam 2007, p. 135.

¹¹ For the limits of liberal multiculturalism, see Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no. 225, September-October 1997, pp. 28–51.

predilections that bring it into existence? To do so would clash with one of its core values—an ethical respect for the ‘other’ that is the basis for free trade, free cultural exchange and even tourism. More fundamentally, the danger of any oppositional art, of an art that speaks too clearly and with too radical an intent, is that it takes on too clear a use, losing its art-like character to become a part of the mundane world of politics and propaganda. In its celebration of individual autonomy, art must never tie itself to use, or must only do so in gestures that are self-evidently futile or Quixotic.

Hence the hard-to-credit claims of artists, who on the face of it appear manifestly political, and whose work appears to set out to alter a political climate of opinion, such as Santiago Sierra and Regina José Galindo, that their art is meant to have no political effect. Hence, the continual playing up in contemporary political video and photography of the mechanisms and rhetoric of representation (for instance, in the work of Omer Fast), so that thoughts about political content face continual interference from those about how politics is represented.

As the boom and the war on terror coincided, the Biennial, a thermometer of art world climates, registered both, crazily. So the phenomenon of the split Biennial emerged, in which the formal and the political were pushed up against each other without sufficient reflection or mediation: signal examples here include Robert Storr’s Venice Biennale (2007), and Roger Buegel and Ruth Noack’s Documenta XII. This was the high art reflection of the fracturing of globalisation—in broken and deeply split Biennial displays, which no longer seem to function comfortably as the mere emanation of the aesthetic tastes and ideals of the curators, but must also register, with acute discomfort, the political storm that blows beyond their walls. Sometimes the decorative and the political met in bizarre works of political entertainment and spectacle. More often, the bewildered viewer, unenlightened by confused curatorial justifications, moved from decorative abstraction and knowing kitsch to large-scale displays of documentary photographic and video work that at least referred to the most hideous and desperate human situations. In the worst cases, the political, and even terror itself, was rendered aesthetic.¹² Curatorial pretensions to coherence were lost or wilfully abandoned.

The Crash

Plainly, since autumn 2008, things have changed again with the growth of the global financial crisis, which has had a deep effect on the economy of art. Even in October 2008, contemporary art sales in London were badly affected, with many lots bought in, and others failing to meet their estimates—including works by major artists such as Gerhard Richter and Takashi Murakami. Buying has not ceased, and occasional signal prices are reached, to much publicity, though rarely with contemporary works. Recently, the number of contemporary art lots sold has halved, and their overall value has fallen even further by over three-quarters. In other words, compared with the previous season, about half the number of works were sold, and at an average of about half the previous price.¹³ Hedge fund traders have been leaving the market. So the effect is already profound, and we are, most likely, at the beginning of this recession.

¹² This is the argument of Oliver Marchat on Documenta XII. See ‘Schröder’s Return: Documenta 12 as a German Summer-Camp of Reconciliation’, in Irene Montero, ed., *¿Modernidad? ¡Vida! Documenta 12*, Brumaria, Madrid 2007, pp. 375-81.

¹³ See Colin Gleadell, ‘Art Sales Halved at Sotheby’s and Christie’s as the Recession Hits the Art Market’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 2009.

I have tried to come up with a visual illustration for the crisis, along the lines of those photographs of vast numbers of new cars, sitting unsold near their factories; here bored and lonely art dealers try to amuse themselves with papers or laptops at the Zoo Art Fair in London last autumn.



Figure 4 a&b: Zoo art fair dealers, London, October 2008



It is too soon, of course, to say what will happen at this time of unique economic trouble. Art at a time of recession tends to become more innovative, as artists have to abandon the golden umbilical cord to connect to new audiences, rethink their identity, exploit new technologies, and engage with issues that interest large numbers of people.

It may be that recession will lead, as it has done before, to new modes of working in which collaboration, dematerialisation and the side-stepping of the market gain some

traction. In a situation where the art world was split weirdly between an engagement with politics and the (rarely overlapping) gilding of the lives of the global elite, we may expect radical change when one half of the structure is suddenly chopped away. One might hope for a wave of work that is not only documentary but is also fixed on new technologies of communication, and that engages with its audience seriously in collaborative works of discourse, that, in short, takes democratic values seriously. Yet it may be that the art world as it is currently constituted is unsuited to deliver such work, and that only a recession that is deep and long enough to change the basis of its economics, and the very conception of what an art work and an artist is, can change that.

We are, nevertheless, faced with two deep uncertainties: first, that the financial crisis is an unprecedented one—the first in the post-Cold War era to have done what previous crises threatened to do, and become global—and we have no idea of its length, depth or true character. Second, that in its unfolding, we have little notion of the shape of the power relations that will emerge in the world that follows: will this, for example, spell the end of US dominance, as many commentators have been warning for so long?¹⁴ And, if so, where will the new centres be, and what will be the concerns of those who govern them? In that new world, it may be Europeans and North Americans who have to come to terms with the invasion of dominant alien species.

¹⁴ See, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power: The US in a Chaotic World*, The New Press, New York 2003.