

Free Trade / Free Art

Julian Stallabrass

If art dynamically defines itself against what it is not as circumstances change, at first sight there seems to be no system against which it is currently more differentiated than the global neoliberal economy, founded on the ideal if not the practice of free trade. The economy functions strictly and instrumentally according to iron conventions, imposed unequally on nations by the great transnational economic bodies; it establishes hierarchies of wealth and power; it enforces on the vast majority of the world's inhabitants a timetabled, and mechanical working life, while consoling them visions of cinematic lives given meaning through adventure and coherent narrative (in which heroes make their lives free precisely by breaking the rules), and with plaintive songs of rebellion or love. This is the nerve pressed on by Johnathan Richman's deceptively saccharine song, 'Government Center'. Here are some of the lyrics:

We gotta rock at the Government Center
to make the secretaries feel better
when they put the stamps on the letter...

We won't stop until we see secretaries smile
And see some office boys jump up for joy.
We'll tell old Mr. Ayhern, "Calm down a while,
You know that's the only way the center is ever gonna get better"

The song ends with the dinging of a typewriter bell. It tells its listeners what pop songs are (mostly) for.

Art appears to stand outside this realm of rigid instrumentality, bureaucratised life and its complementary culture. That it can do so is largely due to art's peculiar economy, founded in the manufacture of unique or rare artefacts, and on its resistance to mechanical

reproduction.¹ That resistance can be seen most clearly in the tactics used by artists and dealers to constrain artificially the production of works made in reproducible media, with limited edition books, photographs, videos or CDs. The art market is regulated by dealers who control not only production but also consumption, vetting the suitability of buyers for particular works. There is less regulation in the so-called 'secondary market' of the auction houses, but even there the market is hardly free, being subject (aside from the recent scandals about systematic price-fixing) to reserve prices below which a work will not sell, and the manipulation of prices by owners buying up their own pieces. This small world (which from the inside can appear autonomous, a micro-economy in which market feedback is produced by a few important collectors, dealers, critics and curators) produces art's freedom from the market for mass culture. To state the obvious, Bill Viola's video pieces are not play-tested against audiences in the Mid-West, nor are producers forced on art bands like Owada to ensure that their sound will play inoffensively in shops or appeal to a core market of eleven-year-old girls. So this cultural enclave is protected from vulgar commercial pressures, permitting free play with materials and symbols, along with the standard breaking of convention and taboo.

The freedom of art is more than an ideal. If, despite its great insecurity, the profession of artist is so popular, it is because it offers the prospect of unalienated labour in which artists, unchained from the division of labour, and like heroes in the movies, endow work and life with their own meanings. Equally for the viewers of art, there is the possibility of a concomitant freedom in appreciating the purposeless play of ideas and forms, not in slavishly attempting to divine artists' intentions, but in allowing the work to elicit thoughts and sensations that connect with their own experiences. The wealthy buy themselves participation in this free zone through ownership and patronage, in part because such participation is a genuinely valued good; the state ensures that a wider public has at least the opportunity to breathe for a while the scent of freedom that works of art emit.

Yet there are grounds for wondering whether free trade and free art are as antithetical as they seem. Firstly, the economy of art does closely reflect the economy of finance capital, if

¹ The point is sharply made in Eric Hobsbawm's lecture published as *Behind the Times: The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde*, Thames and Hudson, London 1998.

not capital as a whole. In a recent analysis of the meaning of cultural hegemony, Donald Sassoon explored patterns of import and export of novels, opera and film in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Culturally dominant states have abundant local production that meets the demands of the home market, alongside much exporting of cultural goods and few imports.² In this way, France and Britain were dominant in the production of literature in the nineteenth century. Currently, for mass cultural products, it is clear that the US is by far the dominant state, exporting its products globally while importing very little. As Sassoon points out, this does not mean that everyone consumes American culture, just that most of the culture that circulates across national boundaries is American.³

Sassoon rules fine art out of his account on the sensible grounds that it has no mass market. Trade figures are in any case hard to interpret in a system that is thoroughly cosmopolitan, so that you may have a German collector buying through a British dealer the work of a Chinese artist resident in the US. We can, however, easily get an idea of the volume of trade in each nation, and, given the high volume of international trade in the art market, this does give an indication of global hegemony. Here there are striking parallels with the distribution of financial power. As one might expect, the US is dominant, accounting for a little less than a half of all global art sales; Europe accounts for the great majority of the rest, with the UK taking as its share around a half of that. France is a major source for art-dealing, while Italy and Germany also have significant markets.⁴ Art prices and the volume of art sales tend closely to match the stock markets, and it is no accident that the world's major financial centres are also the principle centres for the sale of art. To raise this parallel is to see art, not only as a zone of purposeless free play, but as a minor speculative market in which art objects are used for a variety of instrumental purposes, including investment and tax avoidance.⁵

² Donald Sassoon, 'On Cultural Markets', *New Left Review*, new series, no. 17, September/ October 2002, pp. 113-26.

³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴ The Art Sales Index figures for 2000-01 of percentages of the overall market are: USA 48.9, UK 29.29, France 6.27, Italy 2.9, Germany 2.79. See www.art-sales-index.com

⁵ For a detailed account of some of these motives on the part of corporations, see Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, Verso, London 2001, ch. 8. Wu makes the important point that many of these motivations remain secret.

Secondly, and to banish such crude economic considerations from the minds of viewers, contemporary art must continually display the signs of its freedom and distinction from the mass, by marking off its productions from those of cultural products bent to the vulgar forces of mass production and mass appeal. It often makes a virtue of obscurity or even boredom to the point that these become conventions in themselves. Its lack of sentimentality is a negative image of the sweet fantasies and happy endings peddled in cinema and television. In its dark explorations of the human psyche, of which the worst is almost always assumed, it appears to hold out no consolation. Yet, naturally, all of this ends up being somewhat consoling, for its over-arching message is that such a zone of freedom can be maintained by the instrumental system of capitalism.

Thirdly, and most dangerously for the ideal of unpolluted cultural freedom, it is possible to see free trade and free art not as opposing terms but rather as forming respectively a dominant practice and its supplement. The supplement may appear to be an inessential extra to what it supplements but nevertheless, like the afterword to a book or footnotes to an essay, has a role in its completion and shares its fundamental character.⁶ On this schema, free art has a disavowed affinity with free trade, and the supplementary minor practice is in fact central to the operation of the major one. So the tireless shuffling and combining of tokens in contemporary art in its quest for novelty and provocation (to take some well-known examples, sharks and vitrines, paint and crockery, paint and dung, convincing simulacra at odd scales, mattresses and vegetables) closely reflect the arresting combinations of elements in advertising, and the two feed off each other incessantly. As in the parade of products in mass culture, forms and signs are mixed and matched, as if every element of the culture was a fungible token, as tradeable as a dollar. Furthermore, the daring novelty of free art, and its continual breaking with convention (at least, so curators assure us) is a pale rendition of the continual evaporation of certainties brought about by capitalism itself.

The supplementary character of free art to free trade is becoming more visible as both corporations and states, aware of the lack in free trade, attempt to supplement it by making instrumental demands on art. Corporate demands on art have become more widespread and

⁶ The model here is Derrida's account of Rousseau; see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1976, pt. II.

systematic. Business enters partnerships with museums or artists in which the brand of one is linked with the brand of the other in an attempt to inflate them both. Strict criteria are followed in deciding whether to support art events or institutions. Among the most important of these are whether the art audience matches the business' target markets, the likelihood of extensive media coverage and the promotional potential of the artists involved.⁷ Among the systematic effects that corporate decision-making has had on the arts are the emphasis on the image of youth (an attempt to capture youthful, sophisticated but jaded consumers long inured to the effects of advertising), the prevalence of work that reproduces well on magazine pages, and the rise of the celebrity artist.

Aside from these immediately commercial concerns, corporations have been involving themselves in programmes that widen access to the arts, or link it to progressive social causes. Their involvement in such causes produces a double effect: to draw in a diverse or disadvantaged audience, partly in the hope that upward mobility may produce future consumers, and mostly to assure the elite audience for art that what they are seeing are not merely aesthetic sweeties (the consumption of which is haunted by guilt) but also phenomena of worthy social significance.

Recent state demands on art complement those of the corporations, for both have similar interests in fostering social calm, cohesion and deference in the face of the gale of creative destruction that the economic system they are committed to propagating continually gives rise. In Britain, the Labour government saw art as a way to boost the economy, particularly in the so-called 'creative industries', as a tool to regional development, and as a social balm to heal the divisive social rifts opened up by the long years of Conservative rule.⁸ Art should be of quality without being elitist, and should draw in new, diverse audiences. There are similar moves in the US where National Endowment for the Arts funding, long under successful attack from conservative politicians, is justified on the grounds that art has a role to play in social programmes, including crime reduction, housing and schooling. The danger of such moves—highlighted in a survey of attitudes entitled *Art for All* in which there is much moaning about state direction of the arts—is that in revealing the instrumentality of

⁷ See Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists and Corporate Sponsorships*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2002, p. 30.

⁸ See Chris Smith, *Creative Britain*, Faber and Faber, London 1998.

art, they also reveal with too much clarity the relationship between art and the state, which is supposed, after all, to be founded on idealism and eternal human values.⁹ Art can only meet the instrumental demands of business and state if its function is concealed by the ideal of freedom, and its qualitative separation from free trade is held to faithfully.

The situation begins to change once again, however, as it becomes clearer that the system of free trade is in difficulty, as the global economy enters recession. Art, like all conspicuous consumption, blooms in glut and withers in straitened times. As the downturn lengthens, the apparent certainties of the past decade recede. Even the intensification of US economic power may be an illusion. Robert Brenner in his prescient book, *The Boom and the Bubble*, uses a long-term analysis of the comparative position of the major industrial trading blocks since the Second World War to show that the US sometimes sacrificed short-term economic gain (for example, by keeping the dollar strong) to reap the benefits of long-term development of economies elsewhere, notably in Germany and Japan. The withdrawal of this strategical largesse in the 1990s produced a temporary boost in US fortunes, and the decline of those of its major trading partners, in a development that led to much crowing about the superiority of the neoliberal economic model.¹⁰ Now, however, faced with recession in the US, brought about by the collapse of the dot.com bubble, financial scandals and lately the threat of war, coupled with long-term recession in Europe and East Asia, a highly threatening situation has developed.

If the effects of the recession on the art market have been so far muted, and have certainly not reached the levels of the 1989 crash, it is because at a time of very low interest rates, art can seem to be a good investment. Nevertheless, the contemporary art market is showing more bubble-like characteristics than the rest, especially with unexpectedly high prices being achieved at auction. It is uncertain how long the market will retain its confidence, especially as Japanese corporations and museums finally begin unloading some of the art works that they purchased at very high prices through the 1980s. The collapse of Enron is symptomatic of the links between the art market and the corporate world. The company's largesse, founded on fraud, floated the Houston art world. Enron had a reputation for taking

⁹ Mark Wallinger/ Mary Warnock, eds., *Art for All? Their Policies and our Culture*, Peep, London 2000.

¹⁰ Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the Global Economy*, Verso, London 2001.

economic risks which was matched by the building of an art collection that was more daring than the general run of corporate collecting, which is often confined to bland (and so as not to occupy office space, flat) works. Their new Houston HQ was to be decorated with site-specific commissions from, among others, Olafur Eliasson and Bill Viola.¹¹ The last recession saw a slaughter of dinosaurs as the environment changed, with the death of many a US and German neo-expressionist beast. The new one is likely to do the same—already the prices of some artists, including Damien Hirst, are falling—and will offer opportunities as free trade sputters.

Among the opening remarks of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno has this to say about artistic freedom: ‘...absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole.’¹² Until that wider unfreedom is effaced, the particular freedoms of art run through the fingers like sand. While they may open a utopian window on a less instrumental world, they also serve as effective pretexts for oppression. To break with the supplemental autonomy of free art is to remove one of the masks of free trade. Or to put it the other way around, if free trade is to be abandoned as a model for global development, so also must be its supplement, free art.

¹¹ David d’Arcy, ‘Enron Collapse is Blow to US Art World’, *The Art Newspaper*, 24 December 2001.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 1.