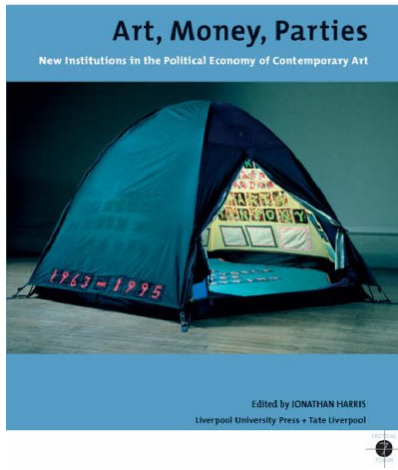


Art's Monied Parties



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Art's various uses have been peeping out from behind the cloak of idealism lately with increasing frequency. It is hardly surprising, what with corporations directly running art competitions, curating shows and having the contents of their collections displayed at the very heart of the museum world (UBS at MoMA), and with states increasingly insisting upon art's economic and social usefulness, that viewers often have these extraneous matters pressed on them at the expense of a pure engagement with the aesthetic. There have also recently been several published accounts of those interactions, notably Chin-tao Wu's *The Privatisation of Culture*, which dealt with the uses of art for business in the US and the UK, Mark Rectanus' *Culture Inc.* that did the same for the US and Germany, while if you want to know what a corporate-curated show about art and economy looks like, you can go to Siemens for the answer.¹

Art, Money, Parties, edited by Jonathan Harris, covers similar territory, though in a necessarily more episodic fashion, since it is a collection of papers from a conference.² Rather than survey the entire contents, I shall touch on three strikingly contrasting elements. The first is

¹ Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, Verso, London 2001; Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists and Corporate Sponsorships*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2002; Deichtorhallen Hamburg, *Art & Economy*, ed. Zdenek Felix/ Beate Hentschel/ Dirk Luckow, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit 2002.

² Jonathan Harris, *Art, Money, Parties: New Institutions in the Political Economy of the Arts*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2004.

a long anodyne interview with Sadie Coles, conducted by Harris, which is useful mostly for what it omits. Plainly, if you want to know about the art market, you should talk to dealers, but equally plainly there is a lot that they either cannot or will not say. Harris asks many questions to which Coles has no meaningful answer—for instance, what she thinks about how she should deal with artists, to which she replies:

I feel that it is such an instinctive job that you just do it according to what works on an individual basis within the parameters of good business practice; I don't think the basic practice has changed that much. And each dealer has their particular way of doing it. (p. 84)

Naturally, the idea that good business practice might obtrude on the autonomy of either dealer or artist as sovereign individuals cannot be countenanced. This entire field of enquiry is hobbled by secrecy, both from private businesses, which are not obliged to publish accounts, to state bodies that happily conceal their activities from the public that funds them. Wu, with great nerve and persistence, managed to ferret out much sensitive information; museums would routinely deny her access even to such apparently innocuous pieces of information such as the number of their staff devoted to 'development'—and it is extraordinary that state-funded bodies should keep such things secret. More generally, the motives, means and operations of private businesses and corporations that collect, deal, display and invest in art are hidden, as are much of the details of the arrangements between these bodies and the various organs of the cultural state. Anecdotally, one knows that a great deal of art trading goes on for purposes which are far from lofty, and take in money-laundering, tax evasion, forgeries and so on. Very occasionally, as with the Japanese property scam that helped burst the bubble of the 1980s art market, these matters come out into the open; but mostly they remain nicely secreted, and this nation with its harsh libel laws, established to protect the rich, is the last place in which to study or publish the specifics.

More useful is an essay by Lewis Biggs, who runs the Liverpool Biennial. He is quite clear about the aim of the Biennial—to promote and develop the art infrastructure of the city—and the piece is a telling mix of idealism and hard-headed detail. So Biggs tells us that the first Biennial in 1999 was part-sponsored by a phone company anxious to distribute its

phonecards but private sponsorship has since declined, following the dot.com crash, and as companies increasingly look to events that they can directly own, such as Beck's Futures. There is even a little here about the importance of parties, and anyone who attended the opening jamboree of Liverpool's first Biennial, in which St George's Hall was washed with coloured lights, and stern Victorian statues looked down on the heaving, glamorous crowd and champagne cascades, may have had the impression that *this* was the centre of the Biennial, for which all the rest was an admittedly elaborate pretext. The important point here is that the circuits of art, and the money flows with it, are also circuits of discourse between favoured members of an elite, and that those events at which they circulate and talk are venues for the creation and confirmation of value. Lacking many of the more formal features of a functioning market, parties are central to the art economy, and much more could have been written about them. Despite the detail of Biggs' essay, he eventually settles on conventional positions; after listing some of the uses to which people put art to—from investment to fashion statement—he concludes comfortably that art's 'polyvalence' is its most positive attribute (in other words, don't enquire any further; people use art for different purposes, and that is a Good Thing). And it is extraordinary that so concrete a piece concludes with this injunction:

Think of the city as a cathedral, for a moment, and the Biennial as a liturgy designed to extrapolate meaning from the built surroundings. The Biennial involves a kind of pilgrimage for the visitor, treating the sites of public art through the city as if they were 'stations of the cross'. The event organisers are the equivalent of church wardens, and the artists the priests of this party/ congregation, but it is essential that the art itself remains the 'host', because it is only the host that can give a true sense of art-communion. (pp. 51-3)

This thoroughly disgusting passage serves to highlight the secular faith that underlies the much remarked-upon revival of the aesthetic in contemporary art (beauty, along with painting, is rediscovered regularly with upturns in the economic cycle). Since the circumstances for its exercise have become more and more unpromising as commercial and state pressures have borne down on the arts, the propaganda surrounding them becomes more strident, and explicitly spiritual or quasi-religious.

At first, Stewart Home's essay appears as a refreshing blast of cold air, cutting through the religious vapours. Art is seen as a tool to transform the underclass into polite bourgeois subjects (surely the intention of the current British government), and artists as romantic cretins, desiring to live as outsiders, apart from all the crudities of instrumental life, but in doing so feeding their own sense of superiority (and surely that of their viewers), and so buttressing existing hierarchies. Yet confusions creep in as Home, in trademark fashion, uses the essay to promote his own practice as a genuine alternative to this simple scenario. It becomes less and less clear how Home's own outsider status—which as Matthew Collings puts it in a passage cited by Home, the art world uses to flatter its own pretensions to being liberal or even radical—is any different from the rest. Worse, for Home the possibility of revolt and its recuperation can be themes of the work itself, pantomime enactments of effective action and its assimilation by the establishment. Once you acknowledge this, then a remarkable range of art products can be sanctioned, and there is a perverse logic to Home's recommendation of not only his own practice but that of Sam Taylor-Wood, as opposite poles of self-conscious radicalism and recuperation.

It is possible to do better than this analysis, but to do so we need to resist the temptation to implode everything in Baudriallardian paroxysms, and pursue a more consistent and thoroughgoing account of the great changes that have taken place in the art world over the last fifteen years. The pure opposition of art to both the instrumental life of work and to mass culture has been clouded by increasing pressures on art to surrender its free play of ideas and objects in favour of becoming useful. As the storm of the market tears up old attachments and certainties, states turn to art as a social balm to foster calm and cultural solidarity. Corporations bear down on museums, wanting access to the elites that go there, who are more open to the indirect marketing of 'charitable' sponsorship than to direct appeals. Major shows cannot happen without corporate support, so business indirectly decides what gets seen. Corporations generally want art that is accessible (at least at first sight), reproduces well on magazine pages, appeals to the young and wealthy, is newsworthy and connected with celebrities. The results are predictable: an art that plays with novel combinations of recognisable signs in decorative packages. Lots of artists who play at being young (making fan paintings of pop stars, for example), or brand themselves as young, or

make work about youth. The most craven merely video celebrities. Many artists try to brand themselves, as Hirst and Emin have done, so that their works become no more than self-conscious side-effects of their celebrity, since neither artist makes work that is not primarily about themselves. Meanwhile, the museums become brands too, the logo populating banners, posters, wall texts and catalogues, so that any work displayed bears the stamp of their institutional approval. The idea of mounting an exhibition that takes an ambivalent or even critical position towards its contents now appears merely quaint.

Viewed from the [point of view of each artist, every work is the result of some exercise of individuality, and the intricate components that build and affect it. Viewed as an overall system, each artist, in trying to differentiate themselves from all the others, shuffles and combines pre-existing signs and materials in their quest for originality and provocation (sharks and vitrines, paint and dung, boats and modernist sculpture, museums and folk culture, and so on). These amalgamations 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 an exchangeable token, as tradeable as a dollar. The daring novelty of art, with its continual breaking with convention, is only a pale rendition of the continual evaporation of certainties produced by Capital itself, which destroys all resistance to the unrestricted flow across the globe of funds, data, products and finally the bodies of millions of migrants.

Thomas Frank and others have tracked the rise of the corporate rhetoric of non-conformity, in which consumers are continually exhorted to be themselves, break the rules, rebel or even revolt. As Jeremy Valentine notes in Harris' collection, in thinking out the implications of Hardt and Negri's book *Empire* for art, the worlds of business and postmodern theory are now in perfect alignment. In its sanctioned realm of protected freedom, art closely follows such dictates. In recommending the virtues of the neoliberal order—in particular cultural mixing and the demolition of all old attachments—contemporary art celebrates as the exercise of freedom all that is forced on us. That support of neoliberalism is the inverse of the art world's own view of its actions, which are fixed on the particular, the personal and the non-instrumental, not on the sacrifice of these virtues on the altar of global homogenisation. It is just this mismatch that constitutes art's main contribution to what is,

after all, far more effectively carried on by mass culture: an appeal to sections of the elite that stand above and aside from their local cultures and a particularly effective ideological cloak for the actions of that audience in their engagement with global capital.

There are a number of critical responses to this situation. The most basic is to resist the idea that any combination of elements is just as fine as any other, and that all artistic products are an unalloyed good, by attacking the objects in question. The popular joy that greeted the destruction of works in the Momart fire is a symptom of such resistance. A more positive response is to make art of explicit political use, perhaps in the service of the anti-capitalist movements (in very different ways, Brett Stallbaum and Allan Sekula have done just that). Another, often linked, strategy is to undermine the archaic character of the art market and the monopoly of the museum by making art that can be widely distributed, is difficult or impossible to own, and encourages active participation from its users, and much of this has been taking place online.

Art's core purpose is to assure its educated viewers that, despite the corruption of democracy, the manipulations of the media, the pollution of the mental environment by endless and strident commercial propaganda, they are still undamaged and free, capable of subjective profundity, of grasping complexity and contradiction. Paradoxically, art propagandises the very processes that, if applied to its own protected market enclave, would bring about its annihilation. In its increasingly evident use as the servant of business and the state, its main ideological use—its uselessness, purity and disinterestedness—falters. If in wandering around galleries, viewers no longer dwell only on the wonders of art but rather find forced on them the principles of sponsorship or the processes of gentrification, then one of the props of the neoliberal order begins to wobble.