

Money, power, contemporary art - Money, Power, and the History of Art

Martha Rosler

As an artist I know remarked recently to a younger colleague, the art market is not the place to determine aesthetic worth. (Both these women, with significant international reputations, are doing very well in the market; no sour grapes here.) It was unnecessary to invoke the corollary that the market is the place to locate reputations - and fortunes. It was my friend's certitude about aesthetic worth that surprised me rather than her remark about the market, an utterance that was purely rhetorical. This fundamental observation, so basic that "everyone" knows it and therefore no one needs to articulate it, should be given a ritual airing at least once a year, much as one parades the statue of the saint or the deity before the gathered faithful.

It is easy to caricature the (high) art world,(1) since so much of what occurs within it is nightmarish in its unself-conscious crudity, double-dealing, and self-promotion. It is not particularly a province of intellectuality, ethics, taste, wisdom, or even knowledge. It is neither an outpost nor an outgrowth of the university. A dealer once pointed to his coffee table and said, "See this table? That's the art world. And you're either on it or you're not." The table, with its flat surface and clearly demarcated edges, perfectly symbolizes the ahistorical, flat field of commodity, without evolution or context. The art market, and the art world it services, is frequently smallminded and parochial, the proverbial Procrustean bed, seeking the smallest salable unit and creating false meanings that replace the lived relations of artists with rationales for the monetary worth of the object. Critics, especially those in the academy, perhaps brooding over their declining role, have lately lobbied to get rid of the idea of "art" as a discipline of study, to be replaced by "visual culture" or some other leveling designation intended to point to the continuity of art with the rest of culture but whose net effect is, of course, the deprivileging of what occurs in the high art world.

Despite all this, the art world is still the place where relatively uncontrolled, barely instrumental, highly suggestive, aesthetically exhilarating, and inconveniently critical cultural offerings are made that may achieve great resonance beyond the petty universe conditioning their appearance. In the matter of visibility and success, another dealer remarked off the cuff that "the art world takes care of its own." He added, only slightly defensively, that it couldn't be expected to "look outside." So while a theorist and teacher, from his vantage point outside the art market, often reiterates that there is no place "outside" the art world, dealers - all dealers - affirm that "outside" exists. After some defining of terms, these people likely would agree. This semantic disagreement is of interest primarily to artists, despite the fact that the most basic assumptions about art depend on it.

There have been times when artists considered the place "outside the art world" - at least in terms of audience - to be coveted terrain. But it has been twenty years since artists made concerted efforts to change the way the art world was organized and power distributed, and to forsake craft values that rigidify the commodity status of art, locking it into specific kinds of audience reception. In the relatively populist 1960s and 1970s, artists developed a host of new forms and methods of distribution to get outside the "art world," outside the entrenched institutions of galleries and museums, which, with direction from one or two critics, kept tight control on the exhibition of art and the circulation of art ideas. What is it, then, that lies outside the high art world?

Certainly there are multiple art worlds, distantly related at best, of which many rarely impinge on the high art world that is the subject here.(2) With respect to the people composing it, the high art world can be figured as a pyramid with an immensely wide base leading up to a very small pinnacle, the acme of success. Or the structure of the high art world can be conceived as a set of interlocking rings, some close to the center, others further away. (This model appropriately suggests classic "world theory," as formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein and others, which divides the world into metropolitan, semiperipheral, and peripheral regions.)(3) This familiar model denotes, according to venerable sociological analysis, an institution constituted in the main by face-to-face rather than impersonal relations - thus the term "art scene," which emphasizes the performative elements of the contemporary

art world. The art scene, loosely defined, is a set of social relations within and around the system of production and distribution constituted by the institutions of the art world whose prominence in the contemporary arena advances and recedes. The art world is most potently envisioned as a universe of discourse (secured by its economic base), and if one is not inculcated into its reigning discourses as propagated and promulgated in magazines, journals, books, reviews, classrooms, catalogues, and wall labels; if one does not produce for the market of objects generated within that universe; and if one is engaged in a different discourse and a different marketing system, then it makes sense to talk about being outside. Even those who make videotapes and photographs are uncertain about their status vis-a-vis the art world - their material products are of only marginal interest to the market and only slightly more so to the institutions that face the public and draw audiences.(4) There is functionally an "outside" if one is considering the means of distribution, promotion, and reception for high art. Even so, the insularity of the high art world from the rest of culture is less than it is often proclaimed to be. Some types of nonprofessionalized art, such as that of children, the mad, street artists, untutored "folk art," is repetitively conscripted into the scene and the market - as one form or another of "outsider art."(5) These marginalized forms, as always, feed the art world mainstream, The mildly permeable art world boundaries are primarily breached by virtue of forays outside the metropolis in a manner reminiscent of old-fashioned imperialism. Although the importance for artists of popular culture and mass culture is well recognized, the shaping effects of high art on popular and mass culture are underrated; as I mentioned earlier, the fields of cultural production are interlinked. All such institutions and social relations are not otherworldly but part of society, and there is little sense in talking about being outside a social system. This is what my teacher-friend and the cultural-studies advocates mean: that there is no social location untouched by the general organization of society.

Despite this obvious fact, artists succeeded, from about the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, in gaining much more control over many elements of the art world, even if ultimately the structural changes brought the art world closer to pop culture. This had different consequences from those intended by many of the artists who had developed "alternative" art forms, as well as journals and exhibition spaces in which to present them without the pressure of commercialism. The regularization of conditioning institutions for high art, from schools to publicity apparatuses to distribution systems, was undoubtedly inevitable, reforming a highly restricted system to one more in keeping with the postwar institutions of mass entertainment, advertising, information, and merchandising. The popular and financial success of Pop art proved that there might be both a wide public and a ready market for high art, as long as it did not challenge the received worldview too strenuously.

The art world at present is dominated by but is not identical with the art market. The art world, clearly, is directly related to other capital markets, and even though common art world business practices are specifically proscribed in the rest of the (United States) financial world, the art world is just a little corner of the speculative markets - albeit a highly specialized one. The global recession of the late 1980s brought about the collapse of the art market, leaving a radically altered terrain. The auction market has rebounded more than the contemporary galleries, a large number of which have closed; whole cities have ceased to be sites of any significant monetary activity.(6) The art world, and the "art scene," has contracted, but it continues. The art world is still centered in New York City (the "metropolis" in the world-system model), as it has been since the mid-1960s, when it followed the money there. In terms of hierarchies of production, the trends of the art world may begin elsewhere but they wind up reined out of New York. Nevertheless, true to the center-periphery model, many cities had highly active art scenes that were not oriented toward making (a lot of) money from art. The rising tide of public funding raised the level of participation in this "alternative" art world. By the 1970s increasing artistic independence left gallerists and critics at a loss to characterize the period's production as a particular movement or style, a move deemed necessary to marketing it effectively. The art world was held to be in the grip of "pluralism" until the end of the decade, when dealers seized the initiative. The art world had greatly expanded and its institutions become more porous, open to influences from artists and others, including culturalfunding intermediaries for political institutions, which brought in the language of social responsibility that had, ironically, been rejected earlier (when it was expressed somewhat differently, it is true) as being against the spirit of art or even as socialistic.

In the late 1970s, the most powerful economies, Germany, Japan, and the United States, brought a staggering amount of capital into the art market. Corporations and individuals were looking for superb symbolic goods, and nothing can provide gloss so well as a well-

regarded handmade high art object. The importation into the New York art world, by a coterie of New York dealers, of large-scale bravura painting by male artists from Germany and Italy - neo-Expressionism - completely changed its organization, control, and presuppositions. Aestheticism shouldered aside the various types of work that suggested that artists were more than semirational creative individuals, swamping the vague ethos of democratic participation, artistic autonomy, and acceptance of a plurality of styles.

The art world of the 1980s functioned much more clearly as a marketing system in which everyone knew the rules. The role of critics was less important, that of dealers much more so. Young artists fresh out of art school were recruited to new galleries built on the pugnaciously chipper production of young New York artists that countered the dominant European neo-Expressionism. But there was little interest in the noncommodifiable, nonobject-centered art that had been vital since the 1960s. On the contrary, the few young artists pursuing autonomy developed a small-producer model, with self-marketing as the model of liberation from the galleries: deliverance from middlemen rather than an antibourgeois mode of production and distribution was the goal. But for most of the art world, the comparison between the gallery world and a group of designer clothing boutiques occurred to many observers - a linkage that uneasily persists.⁽⁷⁾ Artists may see their work as forms of (appropriative) semiosis, as viral intrusions subversive of institutions and disruptive of capitalist nexuses, but these claims are invisible to the institutional publics and to collectors.

The steady raising of income floor (the amount of money required to rise above poverty conditions) experienced by postwar industrial societies has elevated artists' assumptions about life necessities along with those of most of the population. Postwar social policies of democratizing access to social goods, including high culture and higher education, helped bring art inside the academy, although art has neither sought nor achieved the sort of credentialing prevalent in most other professions, from law and medicine to architecture. In the face of the changes in public acceptance of state spending for social welfare and culture, along with the overwhelming challenges from mass culture and high technology, the combination of academicization and market orientation has produced contradictory strains on artists that are not easily resolvable. Artists, despite allegiances to bohemian values, still want to reach beyond restricted elite audiences and often identify sufficiently with socially and culturally marginalized groups to want to address social concerns in their work. Yet the collectors' market is still the place for fame and fortune. Approaching one's art as a product line is frustrating, as is having to engage in sycophantic behavior - and for uncertain rewards, for the market, as I have suggested, is no more than the proverbial shadow of its former self. For stability, a teaching job in higher education (preferably with benefits and tenure) is very desirable. However, not only are there fewer such jobs now, but school administrators increasingly expect artists to behave like members of any other humanities department, which is highly disruptive to art making and art careers. The academy produces different allegiances from those of artists who live a less highly institutionalized life; some would argue that institutional affiliation fosters artistic timidity. In a different vein, the expectation that young artists will attend these institutions, for all the evident virtues of professionalization and exposure to ideals of artistic integrity and social responsibility, works to reinforce the restricted discourse primarily propagated in such schools and a few journals. The contemporary art world, like all modern technical/professional discursive fields, is cohesive and (inadvertently) exclusionary. Few people not professionally implicated can meaningfully participate in it.

The separation between the wider audience and the educated audience now appears to embarrass museum professionals, who tend to envision (or portray) their roles as either guardians of meaningful culture despite lack of public involvement (when actively justified, this is dubbed elitism) or as the purveyors and interpreters of the best of high culture to the nation (the populist position).⁽⁸⁾ Each position is strategic for soliciting financial and social support, and the term "accountability" is a shibboleth of public art institutions. People in the lower ranks of museum hierarchies - if not necessarily their superiors - are now often motivated to adopt humanistic goals of inclusivity, but they are operating primarily by the light of abstractions rather than lived experience, since museum professionals (other than artists) are drawn primarily from the social elite.⁽⁹⁾ They are responding, among other things, to the importance among the intelligentsia and among some political elites of ideals of social participation incubated in the 1960s. While social divisions in the United States grow as the extremes of income push classes ever further apart, demands for cultural inclusion represented by "identity" movements has increased. One result is an art world version of multiculturalism (and where more appropriately situated than in the realm of culture?), necessary but sometimes painfully formulaic, which produces a shadow

constellation of the identities of the wider society but without the income spread. Such adaptations are relatively transparent while things are running smoothly, but under stress the presumptions are easy targets for ideological sniping from the political right. What is at stake, beyond ideals, is financial support, whether to keep one's job or to garner enough funding, in house or externally, to mount particular exhibitions.

Art administrators and granters take seriously the language of contemporary art and try to keep an oar in the discursive stream. Most collectors, however, obtain their information from dealers and art advisers, whose main job is sales. A European dealer professed astonishment at how little American gallerists know about art beyond or before contemporary market offerings. Collectors of contemporary art, at least in the United States, often appear to know less. It has been instructive to see collectors attempting to catch up with twenty-five years of video history, oblivious of the orientation of most video artists away from art world markets and audiences. Collectors' interests tend to be schematic, since for the most part they are cut off from any direct knowledge of the art scene as lived life and all too often have available to them only cartoons of meaning. Only a few seek or find a route to the information or the social contacts that would enliven and deepen their understanding. Artists have frequently viewed their activity as the production of meaning - often disruptive meaning - rather than as the production of objects per se. But commodification, the fetishization of the corpse of art (and often of the persona of the artist), eventually outruns all art forms, from Dada provocations to medical photography, and in this decade it has caught up with video, as video installation - a fittingly housebroken museum form for the "electronic age."

Political and social elites for much of this century have agreed on the need to contribute to the public sphere through secular institutions such as museums and libraries, repositories of cultural values and standards, to unify society and marginalize restive political groups, satisfying heaven's demand that a small part of their profits be returned as philanthropy to the society that engendered them. But elites have more recently been persuaded, especially through the manipulation of tax laws, that it is more in their interest to hold onto their money. In Britain, which lacks a robust contemporary art market and where the tasks of the upper class along the lines of noblesse oblige are unforgotten, an odd situation has developed in that the new National Lottery has recently begun directing large amounts of money into capitalizing public art projects and events of many types.⁽¹⁰⁾ Here, too, the language of accountability, of educational outreach, and of serving underrepresented communities has begun shaping, on the one hand, a discussion of what is public about art and, on the other, an adjustment of applications, if not of projects, to try to obtain some of the money.

In the United States during the Cold War, it seemed prudent to support art as symbolic of intellectual freedom. Since the late 1960s, corporations rather than individuals have fine-tuned this avenue of giving, putting a happy face of benevolence on what might otherwise be construed as a soulless and menacing entity.

Art, as a status-conferring commodity, especially for individual collectors, remains important, but its role as symbolic of national culture has been supplanted by both popular and patriotic icons: Mickey and the flag - and, for some, the cross. Corporate-made mass culture, which seems self-supporting, is placed at the center of culture as its norm and as the showpiece of democratic social participation. In the turmoil over funding of public projects, elites find it difficult to justify state support for cultural projects that, from high art to midnight basketball, depart from paid spectatorship in mass culture. The all-but-inaccessible discourse of contemporary art, and its ironic alienation from mass culture, means there is no vocabulary for the communication of the importance of art to all of society.⁽¹¹⁾ If mass culture defines the universe of normality, those who do not pull their own weight financially, from poor people and their institutions to artists and theirs, are beyond the fringe. Corporate support of culture has less need of a philanthropic cover now, and the promotional, public-relations, and marketing aspects are more aggressive. When corporations pay to support exhibitions and institutions, the corporate name and its logo, the immaterial body of the corporation, appear everywhere, in larger and larger type - sometimes permanently inscribed on the museum's gallery walls.

Charitable foundations, neither corporation nor the state, also provide funds to cultural institutions. Cultural foundations, or cultural wings of more general charitable foundations, are staffed by people who might be curators in museums or, even more likely,

employees of government granting agencies. In this realm, the language of accountability is especially prominent.⁽¹²⁾ Employees who administer grants always must answer to political appointees or foundation managers responsible for money and appearances; few positions fully shielded from political considerations exist.

The case of an art institution outside the art world testifies to the hidden assumptions behind grant giving. In a recent article a woman who, along with her husband, has spent twenty years aiding "grass-roots" art institutions offers an account of the way in which overblown descriptions, grandiose statements of goals, and outright deceptiveness are the unspoken requirements of grant applications, unconsciously transmitted from funders to potential recipients.⁽¹³⁾ Grants officers at these institutions also often wish to satisfy the demand for social inclusion, with the same narrow interpretation. The author writes that she has been asked why white people - as she and her husband are - merit support, although the pair has been helping people of color manage their projects and obtain funding for many years. The open secret known by every artist and every administrator who must approach funders directly is that the relationship of giving entails answering to someone else's agenda, peppering one's application with the words they love to hear, as well as literally demonstrating submission. The foundations, she writes, believe they have achieved consensus when they are greeted by (unacknowledged) sycophancy in one form or another.

There is no utopia for artists or art organizations, nor, it seems, any stable role. At the very least, social and technological change are too rapid. Even when countries provide support for artists, the result is not necessarily the sort of autonomy American artists have come to desire - that of posing sociopolitical critiques, including challenging received opinions and social mores, perhaps even spurring social change: the gadfly role. The Netherlands, for instance, which has generously supported artists, appears to have steered them, wittingly or unwittingly, away from a social dimension, since artists do not wish to appear to be employed by a political entity to provide political commentary. It seems more comfortable for artists to believe they are funded because of their individual pursuit of aesthetic expression. United States funders, both corporate and civic, now speak of support for artists who work with community groups as "managing diversity," betraying a pernicious instrumentalism guaranteed to evoke horror in those artists.⁽¹⁴⁾ For those artists in the high art world who are always dreaming of reaching wide audiences directly, for those who dream of escaping the soul-bending or work-distorting constraints of marketplace and academe, it is all too clear that there is, at present, no "outside."⁽¹⁵⁾

1. A thumbnail definition of the art world - that is, the high art world - may be necessary here, which I offer without any claim to rigor. I am taking the art world as the changing international group of commercial and nonprofit galleries, museums, study Centers, and associated venues and the individuals who own, run, direct, and toil in them; the critics, reviewers, and historians, and their publications, who supply the studies, rationales, publicity, and explanations; the connoisseurs and collectors who form the nucleus of sales and appreciation; plus the artists living and recently dead who supply the goods. (See Martha Rosier, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis, New York/Boston, 1984.) This art world, if it needs to be said, is located in the advanced industrial countries of the West, along with outposts like Australia and the quasi-Western country of Japan.

2. See n. 1 above.

3. Wallerstein also used the term "core" rather than "metropolitan." The remark attributed to the incoming editor of the *Art Bulletin* that the concept of center and periphery no longer makes sense seems most likely to refer to art scholarship rather than to the "art world." See "Paoletti Named *Art Bulletin* Editor," *CAA News*, XXI, no. 4, July-Aug. 1996, 3.

4. This interest so far has waxed and waned, depending primarily on the status of other art world commodities and the amount of capital in the market.

5. The adjective "outsider" is best regarded as denoting a style rather than a social location vis-a-vis the art market, even though its producers are truly outside the art scene and unfamiliar with its rules and protocols. The dream of innocence in the production of authenticity lives on among collectors and art world professionals, as it does among journalists and tourists. In other words, in the

collective imaginary of the art world, the depthlessness of style produces a longing for an Otherness like a ripe fruit dripping with meaning.

6. Perpetually hopeful, the art press is constantly heralding new beginnings, including the tiny new dealerships starting up here and there, young dealers selling out of their homes, and the flurry of activity in New York's Chelsea district. Virtually unanalyzed, however, is the disappearance of middle-size galleries, for which see Allan Schwartzman, "The Disappearing Middle," *Art & Auction*, Oct. 1994., 140-43. Schwartzman also describes the death of patronage in the "shift of allegiance from artists to artworks."

7. See, for example, Amy M. Spindler, "Fashion as Art. Or Maybe Not," *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 1996, about "moments when fashion and art collided." This article, in the *Times's* "Arts and Leisure" section, centers on the planned exhibition in Florence, curated by Ingrid Sischy, who was the editor of *Artforum* in the early 1980s. But see also, in the "Styles" section of the same issue, David Colman, "Art and Fashion Are on the Outs," *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 1996. As mall-type retailers move into SoHo, quite a few galleries are moving elsewhere, to evade their ambience and their shoppers.

8. The recasting of the role of the museum as a purveyor of social rather than aesthetic goods and knowledge is still primarily an American phenomenon, as attested by a public exchange I witnessed in late 1996 at a gala celebration at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The participants were David Ross, the museum's director, and Jean-Christophe Amman, the director of Frankfurt's Museum of Modern Art. Ross asked for Amman's assent in calling the museum "a traditional educational institution"; Amman demurred, saying that he conceived of the museum as "a think tank providing training in perception."

9. It is only fair to note that this stratum also produces a significant, and perhaps a growing, percentage of artists as well.

10. The lottery, administered by the private company Camelot Group PLC, is directing support to five categories: "the arts, sports, heritage, charities," and "projects to mark the year 2000 and the beginning of the new millennium." Institutions and artists are still trying to understand how to apply for this money and how best to use it. The lottery has been very good for the opera because it has allowed it to refurbish existing buildings, but institutions without substantial reserves or income find it harder, especially since there is no funding for maintenance or lost revenue during periods of renovation.

11. The phrase "all of society" allows me to sidestep here the matter of the decline of the ideological role of the concept of "society" as a complex but finally all-inclusive entity that incorporates a vital representative public sphere.

12. There is a full body of critical literature on the peculiar culture of so-called NGOs, or nongovernmental organizations, which provide and administer aid, generally charitable overseas relief, but the same criticisms apply.

13. Arlene Goldbard, "Let Them Eat Pie: Philanthropy a la Mode," *Tikkun*, XI, no. 4, July-Aug. 1996. The present incarnation of Goldbard's organization, which she does not name in her article, is the California-based Institute for Cultural Democracy. It serves what is known as the "community arts" sector.

14. Some business schools now offer courses entitled "Managing Cultural Diversity."

15. I would be remiss, however, if I failed to acknowledge that some - the inheritors of the utopian dreams of the early video artists - hold out hope for the electronic frontier.

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