

MODERNITY

The internet has transformed the art market from a dealer's paradise to a democratised world where buyers and artists alike can enjoy transparency.

Emma Crichton-Miller **celebrates the revolution. Illustrations by** Chris Burke.

Art collecting used to be an intimate affair. From the rise of the individual collector in the 15th century onwards, it was almost exclusively the preserve of the aristocracy and a wealthy elite, operating in an art world bounded by Europe and North America, involving a narrow range of artists and art works. At first it was the direct relationship between artist and patron that counted. But from around the middle of the 17th century, central to the activity was a bond of trust, as enduring as a marriage, between a dealer, who knew your taste as well as a spouse, and yourself, the client, who might not ask too many questions about how, where and for how much the dealer had secured the magnificent piece he was offering you.

This was a dealer's paradise, an environment where Joseph Duveen for example, born in Hull, the son of a Jewish-Dutch immigrant, who took over his father's art dealership there almost exactly 100 years ago, could rise to become 1st Baron Duveen of Millbank, art philanthropist; or where Ambroise Vollard a colonial upstart from La Réunion, could nurture and pioneer, through his support of Cézanne, Derain, Picasso and others, a worldwide revolution in art and taste. The key to the dealer's power and influence, beyond a discerning eye and an instinct for rising talent, was information. Not just the scholarly art-historical knowledge required of the connoisseur, but an exhaustive, encyclopedic knowledge of who owned which paintings and sculptures, whether individuals or institutions; which similar ones had been sold, when and where, for how much; which artists were currently popular, which were currently waning and so on. It was this market information that was the dealer's primary asset and which it was almost impossible for a mere amateur collector, however dedicated, to acquire.

But all that has changed. As a consequence of an information revolution as far-reaching as Gutenberg's printing press, the art world has been transformed. The facts and figures of the art market, which now encompasses the world, are available instantly at the click of a mouse. Auction reports, gallery information from Shanghai to Santiago, reviews of young artists, lists of museum holdings, pages and pages of art for sale or on view, with many more pages of comment and criticism, pop-up and unfurl across your computer screen with a dazzling array of portals, formats and colours. You want to know which New Delhi galleries you should visit or which Iranian artists you should look out for? You want to track the auction history of a video artist whose work has charmed you? You want to locate a painting you saw mentioned in a review of the Sydney

Biennial? You want a virtual tour of that exhibition in San Francisco or to catch the gossip from an opening in LA? You want to register a bid for a sculpture on sale in Moscow? Once upon a time, participating in the art market as a collector might have meant an afternoon with your dealer, gently preceded by a genial lunch, while works of art were paraded for your inspection. Memories of pictures or sculptures seen on visits to galleries, and private collections at home and abroad, might have been supplemented by photographs or poorly reproduced images in books and catalogues, to provide context and comparison. Buying would be a long-drawn-out affair and in the end, like love, a leap of faith. But now, without moving from your desk you can research, discover and compare. You can scour the world for the art that really turns you on. You can gather the information to judge for yourself how much something should cost and what its investment potential might be. You can ensure that the piece you buy is the very best available of what you like for the very best available price.

The effects have not just been felt in the marketplace. Everyone with a concern for art, from artists themselves through to collectors, galleries, auction houses, museums and foundations, art historians, consultants and critics, have seen their modes of operating radically altered and the patterns of relationship that sustain their activities



reconfigured. One feature of this revolution is undoubtedly the global nature of art making and art buying today. Another has been the extraordinary expansion in the production and consumption of art throughout the world – partly as a consequence of years of financial boom but also in response to the sheer oxygen of attention. No longer the exclusive preserve of a social or financial elite, art collecting has become something anyone might enjoy, at whatever level of the market they feel emboldened to enter. A third, and perhaps most vital, feature has been speed. The rate at which new art and artists are discovered, marketed, sold and sold again, while certainly accelerated by the bull market of the past few years, has been radically speeded up by the power of computers and the internet to accumulate, analyse and display information.

It all began in 1989 when the forerunner of the art market information leader, Artnet (then Centrox Corporation), started researching how to put auction data and, crucially, catalogue images, online. It has now reached a point where the magnificent Saatchi Online, perhaps

Charles Saatchi's greatest contribution to contemporary art, yet still just one among many thousands of art websites,

receives on average 70m hits a day, gives virtual gallery space to 120,000 artists, maintains a saleroom offering, currently, 100,000 works, which in its first year of operation alone sold \$130m of art, and manages to elicit 2.2m votes per week for its art competition, Showdown.

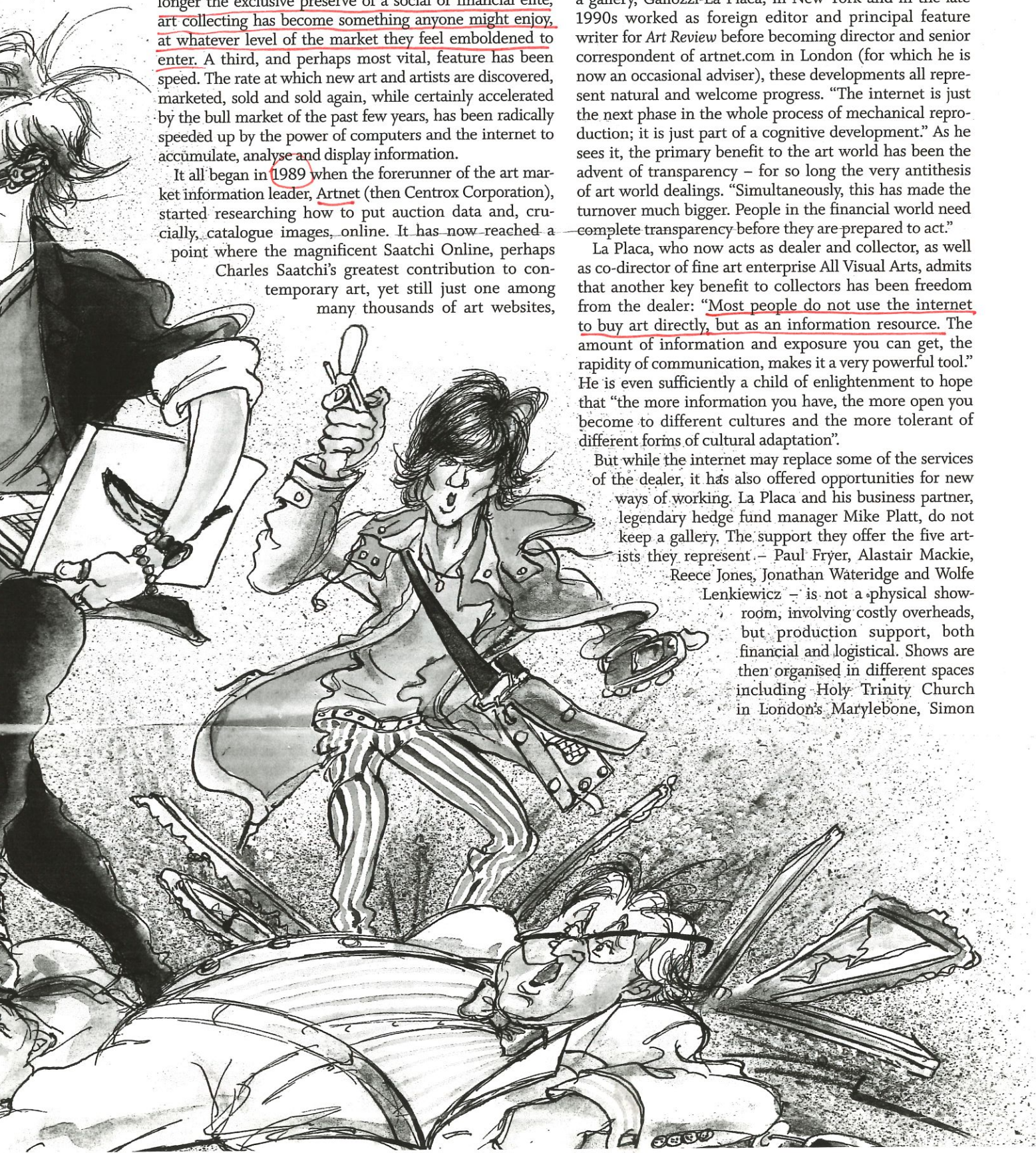
For Joe La Placa, who in the 1980s founded and ran a gallery, Gallozzi-La Placa, in New York and in the late 1990s worked as foreign editor and principal feature writer for *Art Review* before becoming director and senior correspondent of artnet.com in London (for which he is now an occasional adviser), these developments all represent natural and welcome progress. "The internet is just the next phase in the whole process of mechanical reproduction; it is just part of a cognitive development." As he sees it, the primary benefit to the art world has been the advent of transparency – for so long the very antithesis of art world dealings. "Simultaneously, this has made the turnover much bigger. People in the financial world need complete transparency before they are prepared to act."

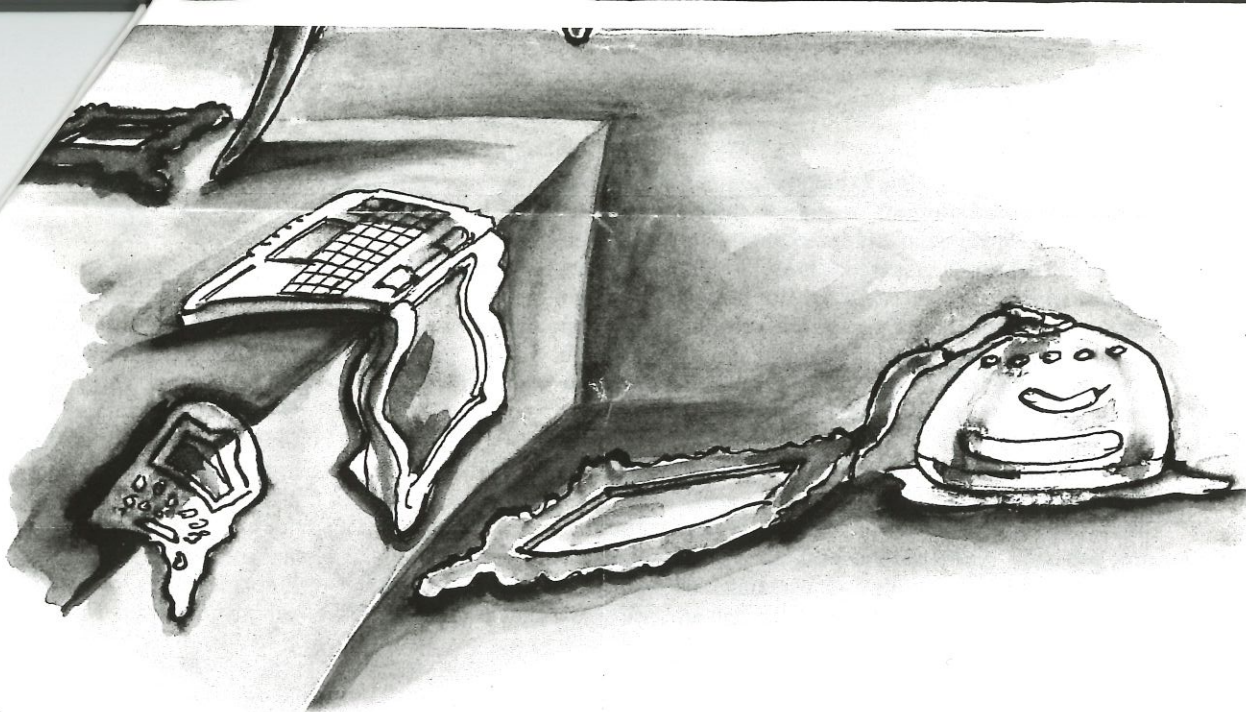
La Placa, who now acts as dealer and collector, as well as co-director of fine art enterprise All Visual Arts, admits that another key benefit to collectors has been freedom from the dealer: "Most people do not use the internet to buy art directly, but as an information resource. The amount of information and exposure you can get, the rapidity of communication, makes it a very powerful tool." He is even sufficiently a child of enlightenment to hope that "the more information you have, the more open you become to different cultures and the more tolerant of different forms of cultural adaptation".

But while the internet may replace some of the services of the dealer, it has also offered opportunities for new ways of working. La Placa and his business partner, legendary hedge fund manager Mike Platt, do not keep a gallery. The support they offer the five artists they represent – Paul Fryer, Alastair Mackie,

Reece Jones, Jonathan Wateridge and Wolfe Lenkiewicz – is not a physical show-

room, involving costly overheads, but production support, both financial and logistical. Shows are then organised in different spaces including Holy Trinity Church in London's Marylebone, Simon





Dickinson Gallery in St James's and the David Roberts Art Foundation in Fitzrovia. Collectors check in online with the virtual gallery to see where they can catch up with the work in the flesh. He agrees, however, that it would be a problem if people bought over the net: "Mistaking the virtual for the real is a great error – there is a lack of direct sensory input."

Having said that, La Placa is a great admirer of what Charles Saatchi has achieved with his website. Though nervous of the word "democratise" – "it suggests dilution" – La Placa cites Charles Saatchi as one of three reasons why London is the world capital of contemporary art: "Charles managed to get the little person involved in contemporary art; he included everyone in the dialogue."

Another of Saatchi's supporters and now business ally, is Simon de Pury, chairman of auction house Phillips de Pury & Co. He too embraces the achievement of the web in widening access to art and the art market: "The internet brings wider knowledge to a wider audience instantly. Artists from all over the world can show their work, bypassing the traditional route of the gallery." The cheery fuchsia website Phillips Art Expert, which runs in parallel with the sober-suited, main auction house website, is intended to draw a younger, internet-savvy audience to collecting, with news, points of view, games, advice and so on. De Pury also looks forward to a time when collectors will be able to try out works of art in virtual reconstructions of their own homes via 3-D imaging – a bit as a you might try out wallpaper on mydeco.com – obviating the need for dealers to freight pieces speculatively across the world to interested clients. So far, however, the auction house still needs to host the sale itself in real space. Somehow the whole exercise of bidding live requires a party mood: "Bidding on the internet is still marginal at our evening sales. Most happens in the auction room or via the telephone. It is larger for Saturday@Phillips, however, with a younger crowd."

Sotheby's abandoned efforts to establish online bidding about eight years ago, when it was badly hit in the dot.com bubble burst. However, it offers a cautious welcome to other aspects of the web. Alexander Branczik, now a deputy director of contemporary art in Sotheby's London, remembers that as recently as five years ago a substantial part of a junior cataloguer's job was to cut up (and destroy) old catalogues. "Access to accurate information was the province of auction house specialists and dealers, not the general public. The

internet has empowered the buyer, who is better informed than ever. This has demystified some of the prices, which in turn gives people greater confidence to bid at auction."

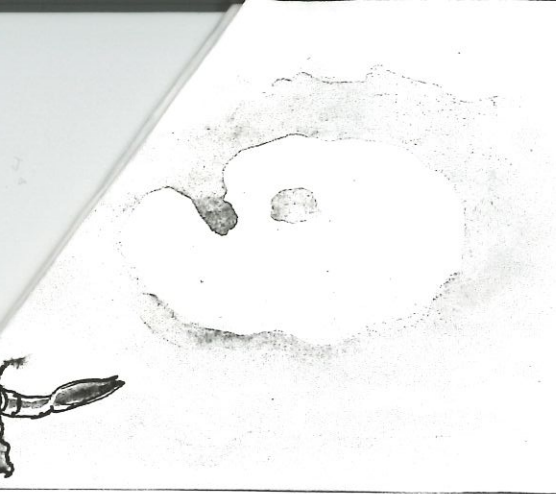
Branczik warns, however, that there are limits to the reach of the internet: "Artnet cannot tell you what the condition of the work is, nor what the impact of the physical object will be. The difference in price between two works by the same artist can sometimes be something as intangible as the impact the object has on you. Art market information is only a small part of what we use to judge the value of something." According to Branczik, established collectors still

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rely on auction house specialists rather than the internet for advice in these areas. Alongside the traditional human contact between individual clients and in-house specialists, however, there increasingly runs a relationship conducted entirely through the website, where users can set up their own wish lists and records of how they have bid, discover the hammer price of pieces they have tracked but lost and cross-collate between collecting categories.

Paul Hobson, director of the Contemporary Art Society, which supports and encourages both private and institutional collecting of contemporary art in this country, is sanguine about this continued separation of research and online buying. "One shouldn't buy over the internet," he advises. On the other hand, "People can't get around an overtly globalised art world. A lot of galleries would say that their purchasers come initially through the internet. Influential collectors will ring up and ask for works to be held for them." And while in many ways the rapid expansion of internet art resources was winged by the huge growth in the art market, these resources may be even more useful in the current art market downturn. "Decisions have slowed down, there is a return to critical judgment. People are wanting to be assured that the work will not only hold its financial value but that it has enduring cultural value, too."

Perhaps even more importantly, however, Hobson sees the internet's greatest impact on artists themselves. "A show like the recent Tate triennial, *Altermodern*, suggests



that there's this idea abroad of artists navigating time and space as pioneers, explorers. The internet is one tool to realise this. It's a state of mind. Young people act simultaneously on different planes of reality. This idea has had an important creative influence." As La Placa puts it, "Art has always been about finding new kinds of space, since the discovery of linear perspective in the 14th century. Virtual space offers a whole new territory for making art."

There has been internet art since the 1990s. Art historian and cultural critic Julian Stallabrass published one appraisal in 2003 entitled *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, which examined how artists could use the internet to bypass what many felt to be the oppressive structures of the arts establishment. The dot.com crash in 2000 dampened the enthusiasm of museums, galleries and the general public, but Stallabrass has noticed over the past six months "a revival of interest in internet art, perhaps as a consequence of the financial crash". As the market becomes more difficult for artists, they will be looking for ways both to make art and to reach an audience. As Stallabrass points out, on the net, "You can make art cheaply and you can make work collectively."

While many internet artists share an anti-commodity attitude, others come up for air with real space art. One of internet art's heroes, the Slovenian artist Vuk Cosic, has even sold downloads through a Spanish museum, the MEIAC, where the only physical evidence you have of your ownership is a certificate of authenticity, turning the notion of the aura of the art object completely on its head. Even Turner Prize winner Keith Tyson has entered the game, advertising his new website, www.keithtyson.com, last December, by offering 5,000 free downloads of his work to *Guardian* readers. Each of the *History Painting* prints on offer was randomly generated by the website, with each printout having its own unique title including the specific location of the user, with an automated serial number. For Tyson, the net is an obvious medium: "The brain is a set of neural interconnections, society is a set of social, economic and political interconnections and art is about linking those two areas – the internet is a good place to do that." It also offers a way of making art that escapes the limited subjective viewpoint of one artist located at one particular point in time and space: "I am interested in bringing different perspectives and different points of time together."

Above all, however, the internet is a great marketplace. On the Saatchi site alone there have been many stories of new discoveries. Whitney McVeigh and Maurizio Anzeri, both based in London, have made most of their income

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from sales over the net, which have in turn led to commissions and invitations to exhibit. Dutch artist Jaap de Vries, who was the 45th person to register on Saatchi Online, has sold many works through the site and been offered shows in the US and Europe. Last year he was awarded the 2008 Wim Izaks Prize (€10,000). And Hannah Bureau, who graduated in 2008 with an MFA in painting from Massachusetts College of Art, has sold nearly 30 paintings to well-known collectors as a result of being on Saatchi Online. For any collector interested in the new and the raw, some concentrated surfing is now as unmissable as those forays to spare galleries off London's Mare Street or Brick Lane, degree shows and far-flung biennials. ♦