

The Absolute Truth about Contemporary Art

BY PETER PLAGENS

As you get older, in the art world as elsewhere, you're confronted with some choices about how to conduct yourself. You can, for instance, stay locked in the style you strutted when you were younger and hipper—that is, continuing to wear a ponytail and tight cowboy shirts with mother-of-pearl buttons long after you've gone bald on top and acquired a gut. Or you can try to keep up with today's younger people by copying their fashions: Shave your head, wear small, expensive blue Italian sunglasses and a shiny suit over a black T-shirt and try to blend in with the 30something critics and curators. Or you can just give up altogether on trying to wax contemporary—and wear bow ties, tweed jackets with elbow patches, and take your proud place as a naysayer who thinks that *this time* the art world really has gone to hell in a handbasket. I find myself thinking about this stuff lately because I'm now 67[[68, if this is published after March 1, 2009]]—an age I seem to have reached suddenly, and quite unjustly, overnight. I realize that I entered the art world, with a newly minted MFA degree, almost 45 years ago. Back then, an artist as mature as I am now would have entered the art world in—Omigod!—the 1920s! Which is to say: The art world in which I now find myself is as different from the one that I entered as the one that I entered was from the art world in the days of the Calvin Coolidge Administration.

Although such early American modernist artists as Arthur Dove, John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe were already prominent in fairly small circles in the 1920s, the American equivalents of the saccharine French academic painter William Bouguereau were much more the typical fare in gallery exhibitions. And the most prominent American art critic was Royal Cortissoz, who wrote that "Modernism is of precisely the same heterogeneous alien origin [as the flood of recent immigrants] and is imperiling the republic of art in the same way. ... Such movements [are] crude, crotchety, tasteless, abounding in arrogant assertion, making a fetish [sic] of ugliness and, above all else, rife in ignorance of the technical amenities. These movements have been promoted by types not yet fitted for their first papers in aesthetic naturalization—the makers of true Ellis Island art." I'm a dedicated modernist and I'm certainly no nativist. But I am a negativist by temperament, and experience has confirmed that 90 percent of what's offered for sale by the galleries today is bad art, and that 90 percent of the art offered for viewing by museums isn't nearly as good as their press releases say it is. Although my reasons for thinking this are wildly different from Cortissoz's condemnation of modernism, I have, over the last 20 years or so, written about the deleterious effects on contemporary art of pervasive irony, the unfortunately increasing overlap of art and superficial

entertainment in gallery offerings, the preening confluence of art and the runway fashion industry, and even the morphing of call-it-like-you-see-it art criticism in more or less plain language into theoretical, judgment-averse “post-criticism.”

When I started writing reviews for *Artforum* in Los Angeles in 1965, in my mid-twenties, I was harder on the art than most of the other contributors. To this day, I see the flaws in art first, and have a tendency immediately to “argue” with art instead of letting it wash over me first. Also contributing to my critical dyspepsia is the fact that I’m an artist *and* a critic. I play on both sides of the street and may, occasionally, fall victim to conflicts-of-interest, express and implied. Finally, in an art world—if not an entire culture—devoted to youth, to “emerging” artists, I collect Social Security. Although I’ve tried mightily *not* to act like a cranky ol’ *eminence grise* and to remain as colloquial (even as wise-ass) as I can, I still sometimes fear that I’m doomed to repeat the perennial cycle of sinking into circle-the-wagons artistic conservatism as I age.

With that confessional prologue in hand, let’s take a look at how the art world* has changed since I got into it. Let’s consider three different art worlds: the “Old Art World” of 1964, the “Changed Art World” of circa 1979, and the “New Art World” of more or less now. In the Old Art World, the typical young, ambitious artist was a white male with an MFA in painting or sculpture. He prided himself on sheer time spent in the studio and what he wanted most in his work

were integrity and consistency; he wanted his work—at least consciously—to express his deepest feelings and esthetic principles without catering to an audience or market. His heroes were grizzled old modernist bastards, guys like Stuart Davis and David Smith, who’d wrestled Cubism into a kind of abstraction and made of it something pragmatically American. Conversation with his artist-buddies was about what was going on during all those hours they spent in their studios. He read the art magazines and took practically every word in them all too seriously.

Our typical young artist ca. 1964 wanted to be able to move to New York so he could expose his work to some influential critics. His idea of really “making it” was to be able to earn a modest living off his work without having to hold an outside job, and he figured if things went right with his career he might be able to do it by age 45. Failing that, he’d settle for a full-time teaching job at a good art school or university where he’d be able to teach good graduate students who wanted to be artists like he was. But he didn’t want to be more than three hours’ drive from New York or Chicago or Los Angeles or San Francisco. Even if he never got to be a player in one of those four cities, he’d be an “artist’s artist,” known for the “toughness” of his work and, perhaps, his teaching effect on students who did go on to make it in the big city.

In the Changed Art World of fifteen or so years later, our typical young artist had a B.A. in something other than art—e.g., anthropology or philosophy—and had gotten interested in art by meeting some artists who came to lecture at his college,

or reading art criticism or books on art theory. He thought, "Hey, I can do this." Although our artist was still likely to be a white male, there were starting to be more women artists in the art world. (Even so, for simplicity's sake I'm going to keep the pronoun male for a bit longer.) Our artist leapt beyond Minimalism—that last gasp of Cubism which reduced it to a *single* cube—and made "post-Minimal" sculpture that emphasized process over product. He used conspicuously natural materials (e.g., rocks and earth and sticks and twigs) or industrial detritus or just odd combos of material, such as rope and wax. Much of the time, his work was militantly impermanent—where materials were dispersed throughout a gallery to make an "installation," rather than joined together to make an object. It's primary aim certainly wasn't to be beautiful, but rather intellectually deep (or at least enigmatic). Our artist's heroes were European thinkers who didn't write directly about art, but instead said profound things that could be applied to making art. Such ideas were what he talked about with his friends. Although a university (rather than an art-school) teaching job would have been nice, it wasn't absolutely necessary because an artist back then could get all kinds of municipal, state, federal and foundation grants and fellowships to make work which, he thought, ought to be as "unmarketable" as possible anyway. And being right *in* a major urban art center wasn't as crucial, either, as long as he could be represented by a good New York dealer. The *dealer* had to be in New York so that the gallery's reputation could get him shows in

Europe. The point of his having shows in Europe wasn't so much sales as it was for his improved reputation getting him invited to do "installations" in museums. His target age for getting on the exhibition-and-installation circuit was before he turned 40, maybe as soon as 35.

In the New Art World of today, the typical young ambitious artist once more has an MFA degree. But in order to get career traction right from the start, it has to be from a short list of "hot" schools, especially one of the big three in southern California: UCLA, CalArts, or Art Center. Since the artist's MFA is now probably in some form of "new media," his or her work (our artist is now just as likely to be female as male) will consist of either some tricky configuration of projected video, or retro-Pop-Art objects in some kind of fancy plastic made on order by a fabricator. Since all but the most minimum-wage adjunct teaching jobs are as scarce as hen's teeth, and since government grants to artists are for all intents and purposes extinct, sales now count for just about everything. So our young artist makes work whose point can be quickly apprehended by peripatetic collectors. Our artist reads art magazines again, but pays much more attention to such web photo-and-gossip web pages as "Out with Mary" on *Artnet.com* and "Scene and Herd" on *Artforum.com*. A good dealer is still a must, but the dealer should be nearly as young and sexy as the art world wants artists to be. Since dealers love to say that an artist is "Atlanta-based," or "Berlin-based" or "Croatia-based" or "Paducah-based"

more than simply “lives in New York” or “lives in Los Angeles,” our artist can—once his or her name pops up in a few art magazines and on enough websites—live anywhere he or she pleases and (with the dealer) arrange sales over the Internet. Our artist talks with friends mostly about prices and money, and starts to feel the sour breath of failure on the back of the neck if he or she hasn’t achieved career orbit by a year or two after turning 30.

In the Old Art World described above, what I’ll call “material culture” (art consisting of stationary physical objects, live theater, acoustic music performed live, etc.) may no longer have been a majority culture, but it was still a formidable minority. Painting and sculpture still had some clout in the general culture. Think Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein or Don Judd. Today, material culture has been reduced to an almost quaint, antiquarian minority when measured against reproduced or electronic culture—movies, television, and recorded music—which in turn has gone digital and is bulldozing everything in its path. Whatever clout painting and sculpture still enjoy in the general culture has to do with either money (that is, sensationally high prices) or the artists being “hot” (that is, photogenic and starting to command high prices). Except for the occasional scandal involving the depiction of sex, or a satire of a religious belief, no really consequential ideas or philosophical tenets expressed in an embodied way in a contemporary painting or sculpture gets

much attention at all. Contemporary painting or sculpture is all about clever irony. Think John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, or Jeff Koons.

But if the art objects of material culture, and the artists who make them are handled adroitly by art dealers—that is, in close conjunction and synchronization with the vast trade in luxury goods, a desire to be in on the latest trends, and through slick magazines, gossipy art blogs, Venice-Biennale-type “festival” exhibitions, cultural tourism, and art trade fairs (e.g., Art Basel Miami, and The Armory Show in New York), —artists *can* prosper, at least monetarily.

Contemporary art objects can function quite nicely as high-risk investments (the cultural equivalent of 1980s junk bonds) and as ostensible evidence of their owners’ being hipper, deeper, more complex people than you might otherwise have thought they were. The reason so many showbiz movers and shakers now so avidly collect contemporary art is that people making a lot of money in reproduced or electronic culture want to prove their chops by showing they appreciate material culture—which, down deep, they suspect is still more profound than the electronic and reproducible culture in which they make their sumptuous livings.

Obviously, there’s a boom market right now in contemporary art—although it well may collapse in a major recession. Younger artists take this condition for granted. They’ve grown up with \$2500 or \$3000 being the absolute minimum price for any serious work of art that isn’t a very tiny print in a very large edition. They

see their peers—the ones who've gotten dealers in big cities, at least—charge mid-five-figures for works in their first gallery solos. And they've seen photographs of the ways in which artists the likes of Julian Schnabel, Brice Marden and Jeff Koons live very, very large. A critic friend says he recently went to an art fair (the art world's version of a boat show) and dropped in at a gallery's booth where a six-foot-by-six-foot painting by the late, well-regarded abstract painter Ray Parker—among those in a recently discovered roll of Parker canvases—was being shown to a potential buyer. The painting was in pristine condition on a new stretcher, and was priced at an unbelievably low \$75,000. The collector, however, said to the gallery attendant, "Well, I might be able to enjoy that if I were *poor*."

The new, boom-market art world is also frenetically international, which, these days, means not just Euro-American. In Asia and South America the art market is also booming. And in the Euro-American art world (that is, the gallery-and-museum network extending from Berlin—and perhaps farther east, from Moscow—to as far west as Los Angeles), galleries and art fairs are wildly interested in non-Euro-American art, especially by Asian artists, and specifically by Chinese artists. Many contemporary Chinese artists were academically trained in realistic drawing and painting so that they could produce propaganda images. With China going capitalist in its own strange way—"directed capitalism," they call it—these artists have either been freed—or abandoned, take your pick—to fend for

their entrepreneurial selves. So they've smartly morphed their pictures of Mao and his loyal followers into a gently satirical form of Pop-Artified Surrealism that plays well with Western collectors. The work is still relatively cheap (although the more well-known artists are getting expensive fast) and collecting contemporary Chinese art gives Western collectors that heady feeling of being "ahead of the curve."

Actually, *everybody*—artists, dealers, curators, collectors and, yes, critics—wants to be "ahead of the curve." The desire to be ahead of the curve is a product of four forces. First is collecting for investment, collecting with an eye on buying *before* the prices go up. Second, there's the emphasis on youth, that is "hot" artists whose greater fame is yet to come. Third, the vestiges of the idea of the avant-garde have metastasized into the wider culture. We (meaning all of us, not just the art world) have accepted "avant-garde" as merely a part of the standard product appeal needed to get something as banal as a cell phone to succeed in the marketplace. "Avant-garde" (a term the late artist Dan Flavin said "ought to be restored to the French military where its sense of futility can be properly appreciated") became "cutting edge," which became merely "edgy" which has now become, of course, merely "cool." Finally, the current art world operates at a frenzied pace. It used to be that even insiders got their news from the monthly art magazines. These days, insiders check such websites as *Artnet.com* and blogs like Tyler Green's "Modern Art Notes" on *Artsjournal.com*

to be updated daily.

In this today's art world, art dealers (the fashionable term is "gallerist") aren't idealist connoisseurs who wait for a good review or two to send a stray collector or two their way. They're sharp, aggressive and tireless business people taking their wares from one art trade fair booth to another, badgering one collector after another, importuning one curator after another. Today's museum curators don't stay bent over books and slides in windowless offices, venturing out only to check on the condition of, or do esoteric scholarship on, neglected works in museum storage. Rather, they're on the go in designer clothes, clutching Blackberrys, visiting those "wherever-based" artists and trying to figure out how to gather a show of a group of artists who aren't well known enough yet for a competing institution to be putting together a group show of them.

All that about the saleability of contemporary art objects having been said, going to the art galleries in New York or L.A. these days is increasingly like going to an "alternative" film and video festival with multiple venues. I'd say that in one out of four galleries I visit on a round in the Chelsea or Brooklyn gallery districts, I'm required to go into a darkened chamber and stand (there's usually no seating or very little seating) and watch a projected film or video for as long as I can bear it or until my schedule bids me move on. A culturally conservative colleague who reviews books and the occasional movie at *Newsweek* once said when I took him with me to a few galleries, "Face it, Peter,

they *all* want to direct."

Sculptor Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* series of films (the final one was three hours long and included an intermission), and his recent epic *Drawing Restraint 9*, co-starring his partner, the pop singer Bjork, have just about bridged the gap between Hollywood cinema—let alone art-house movies—and the art gallery. (Actually, I rather like Barney's films, although they remind me of such early Surrealist films as Salvador Dalí's 1929 silent, *Le chien andalou*, except for a bigger budget.) But Barney is not the only artist working this way. Increasingly, with artists like Eija-Liisa Ahtila from Finland and the Canadian Stan Douglas, films by artists shown in art galleries have story lines that aren't much more fractured than those in such recent Hollywood movies as *Crash* or *Babel* or *Vantage Point*. The production values aren't that much worse, either.

William Wilson, the art critic for the *Los Angeles Times* from the 1960s into much of the 1990s, unironically used the term "veteran vanguardist" as an adjective phrase for artists who worked in the vein of, say, the California abstract painter Richard Diebenkorn, but were less well-known. When Bill used the term, he meant an artist considerably to the left, so to speak, of a traditional landscape painter, but whose work was still quite to right, so to speak, of deliberately scandalous "performance art." Often, the Diebenkornesque artist was a tenured college professor having his yearly or

biennial gallery show. The term “veteran vanguardist,” which was a little silly even back then, would seem completely silly now. There’s no such thing as a “vanguardist” because there’s no such thing as an avant-garde. True, some artists still push the envelope of what’s permissible in sexual and political content, or what’s legal in terms of doing things on public property, or what’s doable in terms of technological sophistication and complexity, or what galleries and museums will put up with in the way of physical risk, inconvenience and insurance liability. But artists doing those sorts of things is so expected it’s almost academic.

Contemporary art still isn’t quite mainstream, however. In terms of cultural popularity and clout, it doesn’t hold a candle to movies, TV, pop music, etc. How many art exhibitions are reviewed on cable television or National Public Radio? How many artists does Terri Gross interview on “Fresh Air”? How many big-time artists’ private lives are the subject of tabloid coverage? Part of this comparative neglect is due to the fact that—artists’ films, videos and performances notwithstanding—contemporary art remains mostly about stationary physical objects. It attracts a relatively small audience because viewers have to come to the art in order to see the original, to get the effect intended by the artist. Television and pop music have no “originals” and come to the viewers and listeners in endlessly reproducible versions. And although you still have to go to the movies in order to see a film on the big screen, everywhere in America

except perhaps Manhattan, a cineplex is more nearby than a serious art gallery or museum.

But part of the comparative neglect also comes from the fact that contemporary art still isn’t intended for a large audience. A contemporary artist doesn’t want a million people to give him or her a dollar apiece to look at his or her work. He or she wants one person to pay a million dollars to *own* his or her work. That being the case, the contemporary artist—whatever his or her still-sublimated movie-directing ambitions—isn’t required to make the work intelligible to a greater public. Chances are, in fact, that the collector the artist has abstractly in mind as a buyer *wants* the work to look a little weird and indecipherable. After all, that’s part of the staying-ahead-of-the-curve feeling the collector is paying for.

The late French sociologist Jean Baudrillard said that we Western urbanites were now living in a “simulacrum” of reality, rather than reality itself—that is, in a kind of Disney World version of Main Street rather than on Main Street itself. His pronouncements used to seem kind of wacky—typical Gallic over-the-top exaggerations which might contain, at best, a grain or two of truth. Now they seem rather like a “so what?” description of our everyday lives, especially to some of us in the art world. Back in the mid-1960s, right about the time I received my MFA degree in that Old Art World, artists without much money but with a need for working space

started illegally homesteading derelict manufacturing buildings in downtown Manhattan. Soon, artists attracted some pioneer galleries, the galleries attracted a few bars and cafés, and the cafés attracted small grocery stores and delicatessens. The arty “SoHo” was born. Then it got to be stylish for architects and lawyers and young bankers to live the way artists supposedly lived, only with a few more amenities. What I call the “imported-beer-ad SoHo” was born. Rapidly, all but the most successful artists (or those, like me and my wife, who found a loft to rent just in time to be grandfathered in under the protective “Loft Laws” passed in the late 1960s and early ‘70s) were priced out, and loft buildings were converted to fashionable residences, a lot of them with doormen, and a couple I know of with commissioned works of art by well-known artists in the lobbies. Sometimes—with Barney’s films or the British artist Damien Hirst’s public manipulations of the fevered market (first, selling a diamond-encrusted skull for \$100 million, and then raking in \$200 million gross by having Sotheby’s in London auction off his work instead of selling it through a gallery)—I get the eerie feeling that I’m living not so much in a “new” art world as in a distended simulacrum of one. But by sticking more and more to painting my paintings and only occasionally contributing articles to *Newsweek*, no longer suffering a full-time journalist’s responsibility to try to cover as much of the art-world waterfront as I can, I am, in this strange new art world, increasingly demurring. I see fewer shows, read fewer reviews, and certainly go to fewer art

parties. In the 1970s, when I was still a cultural tourist in New York, I visited the then-abstract painter Jake Berthot (he’s now a sort of landscapist) in his studio way downtown on Canal Street. Walking to his studio, I was fascinated as usual by the cacophony of posters advertising rock concerts, nightclub appearances, lectures and art exhibitions. I said to Jake that it must be exciting to live in a place where you can go to all this stuff anytime you want to. “Oh, I don’t go out much at all,” he said. “Why not?” I asked. “If you don’t, what’s the point of living in New York?”

“There’s a big difference,” he answered, “between not going out because there’s no place to go and not going out because you choose not to.” Likewise, the young artist entering the art world now—as Jake and I did about 45 years ago—will eventually enjoy the same realization—that the choice lies among going out because everybody else is, holing up in the boonies where nobody goes out, or sticking to your guns while smiling wryly at the teeming hordes.###

* Perhaps I should indicate what I mean by “art world.” There are, after all, many art worlds. There’s the whole world of “Western art,” all that Frederic Remington-like stuff that sells for six figures in places like Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Sedona, Arizona. There’s a whole world of “classical realism,” headquartered in Minnesota, in which realist painters of a *Poussiniste* persuasion paint, sell, and teach disciples in an old-fashioned master-apprentice way. There are the worlds of “outsider art,” of “community murals,” and so on. For this essay’s purpose, by “art world” I mean the one that trades in the kind of modern and contemporary art regularly reviewed in *The New York Times*.