

Explaining Pictures to a Dead Bull The Bruce High Quality Foundation

The history of Postmodernism is a history of willful indebtedness. This has been playing out between the art market and the institutions of art education over the last forty years. The institutions of art education, by being willfully indebted to the art market, have limited art's agency within the market and, by extension, its potential to educate.

Visual art has, throughout history, had an educational dimension; it intends to communicate something so that its subject and its presentation may transform its audience. Think of religious scene painting for example. The Baroque academies ranked the genres of painting based on their supposed educational value. History painting tops the list, followed by portraits, with landscape and still life at the bottom of the list.

Clement Greenberg described the project of Modernism as an inward turn, a move toward self-consciousness. It's tempting to describe the abstract painting that Greenberg championed as a shift away from the educational imperatives of art. But even he admitted otherwise. He said: "Modernism provides a critical commentary constantly adapting to kitsch pseudo-culture."

The paintings of Ad Reinhardt make the point. We can understand his work as a polemic against rote learning, against the narrative build up of knowledge. But they are still actively educational. His work may fly in the face of monkey see monkey do pedagogy, but in doing so it promotes an auto-didactic model of learning, the model now advertised by most art schools.

Reinhardt was himself a professor at Brooklyn College. His lectures, or "un-happenings" as he called them, consisted of slides compiled across cultures and historical eras, drawing out a history of ideas without recourse to narrative progress. In his drawing class students were asked to draw a self-portrait each day, on the same piece of paper, erasing the previous drawing before each class.

Reinhardt's ideas finish off Modernism and anticipate the Postmodern era. This new era, one that will be defined by willful indebtedness both culturally and economically, if we can still make the distinction, begins in 1958 with the advent of the credit card.

Credit, from the latin credo, means "faith," a condition which, according to the Protestant church, must be helped along by the will. The credit card, the mass formalization of willed debt, exemplifies a new conception of time and our relationship to it. The notion that our time on earth earns rewards in the afterlife is largely supplanted by the notion that our work is its own reward, that we should reap its benefits here on the ground, come what may after we're beneath it.

In the arts, this willful indebtedness is first characterized in 1953 when Robert Rauschenberg

creates "Erased DeKooning." Reinhardt's drawing program of self-erasure is replaced by the erasure of a "master." There is no drawing, past or present, only indebtedness. The age old training program of copying the old masters is not so much reversed as distilled to its essence.

1.

The Scull Sale at Parke-Bernet, now Sotheby's, on October 18th, 1973 marks the beginning of the contemporary art market. The sale went forward for the same reasons they always had: death, divorce, or disaster, in this case divorce. But in the wake of the record \$2,242,900 take for the evening, all fears for the viability of the contemporary art market vanished.

Christie's head auctioneer, Christopher Burge, describes the new market paradigm this way: "We are running out of earlier material, so our market is being pushed closer to the present day. We are turning from being a wholesale second hand shop into something that is effectively retail. The shortage of older goods is thrusting newer work into the limelight."

As opposed to buying the work of dead artists, living artists have unknown futures. There is an inherent risk built into the market. Much more so than works by the dead, contemporary art is a futures market, a concept democratized by the introduction of the credit card.

This new market, however, is legally recognized as a luxury market to this day, and as such is free from the regulations that keep other futures markets, like the stock market, in check. This lack of regulation has opened the door to all manner of corrupt business practices. Ring trading, where a small group of people artificially inflate the market for a single artist's work, is a common problem. Christies and Sotheby's, which between them control 95% of the auction market, have also conspired to manipulate the market. The sophisticated schemes that led to the recent credit disaster are completely unnecessary in the contemporary art market. No regulations. No unions. No nothing. We're operating as though it's the 1920s.

One of the chief ingredients that makes corruption possible is naivety on the part of the artists. Take Mark Rothko. The Marlborough Gallery was able to hide his real sales numbers from him through a few simple bank transactions. They effectively swindled hundreds of thousands of dollars from him in his lifetime. It wasn't until after his death, and after they tried to swindle his family out of their inheritance, that any of it came to light.

Artists' financial naivety didn't change with the advent of a market for the contemporary. At the conclusion of the Scull Sale in 73, Rauschenberg allegedly punched Robert Scull telling him, "I've been working my ass off just for you to make that profit."

There were warnings. Allan Kaprow, in his 1961 essay "Happenings in the New York Scene" wrote:

"But for now there is this to consider, the point I raised earlier: some of us will probably

become famous. It will be an ironic fame fashioned largely by those who have never seen our work. The attention and pressure of such a position will probably destroy most of us, as they have nearly all the others. We know no better than anyone else how to handle the metaphysics and practice of worldly power. We know even less, since we have not been in the slightest involved with it. That I feel it necessary, in the interests of the truth, to write this article, which may hasten the conclusion, is even more fatefully ironic. But this is the chance we take; it is part of the picture..."

The so-called "dematerialization of the art object" in the late sixties was not just a reaction to the dominance of painting promoted by Greenberg. It was also a conscious attempt to subvert the fast growing contemporary art market. But the marketplace of ideas that Action, Performance, and Conceptual Art advocated never really distanced itself from the economic market. From 1966 to 1968, the art dealer Seth Siegelaub successfully sold Conceptual Art out of his apartment. Furthermore, the Conceptual Artists were definitely not Hair Shirt artists, rising up out of the wilderness to warn people away from their earthly possessions. By incorporating critical language into their practice, conceptual artists actually sought greater agency in the creation of a historical record, one that, by and large, finds its form today in the publishing and trade magazine markets.

In 1976: A 30 year old Chris Burden opens the Relics show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in Soho. Jasper Johns purchases the nails from the Volkswagen crucifixion. Warhol buys work. Larry Gagosian pays 500\$ for the padlock Burden used in Five Day Locker Piece. Burden: "There was a bunch of us trying to make art that couldn't be sold. Vito Acconci ... Dennis Oppenheim ... we all knew each other. But we were fooling ourselves. I think all work is collectible. All of a sudden, photographs are being sold. Or films ... documents ... something. In a sense we were all really naive."

While these artists attempted to reinvent how art gets made, the dealers were busy reinventing how art history gets made. 1964 sees the first use of the word "retrospective" as a noun, and this type of exhibition became a common way to contextualize a living artist's work along a developmental trajectory. This had the effect of giving historical provenance to contemporary works, giving the impression of stability to the high-risk contemporary art market. Art History effectively became the history of artists' careers in the market.

Julian Schnabel's career, signaling the rebirth of painting and the death of pottery, began in 1978. His first one-man show with Mary Boone in 1979 sold out before the opening. By 82 he had a retrospective of four years of work at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and by 87 he had a retrospective at the Whitney, a month after the stock market collapse.

Despite a plummeting Dow, the art market seemed invincible. In 1990 John Baldessari commented on the collapse of time between exhibition and auction resale:

"The auction houses might try to bypass the galleries. They would approach certain blue chip artists and offer to pick up their whole output and sell it off at auction. I know somebody's going to crack the ice. All the apparatus is in place. As the prices go up there's a lot more scum around because of the smell of money. I have this other theory which has not yet materialized. It seems like there should be the rising up of a lot of Hair Shirt artists, wouldn't you think? Prophets in the wilderness warning about the excesses."

But later that year, a painting by Julian Schnabel titled "Anh in a Spanish Landscape," painted just a few years prior, went up for auction at Sotheby's. The work failed to meet its reserve, announcing the end of the boom. In the auction room there was laughter, and then applause, as though the excesses of the market were embedded in the collective unconscious. Nonetheless, booms and collapses in the art market from the late nineties to today have not brought about any change in attitude.

As the significance of the auction houses on the value of contemporary art was expanding, a small group of artists associated with the conceptual movement (Hans Haacke, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, etc.) tried to get in on the act. In 1971, Seth Siegelau and the lawyer Bob Projanski introduced The Projanski Contract. The contract stipulated a royalty fee: 15 percent of the profit from any resale of the work would go to the artist. It also stated that the artist must approve of loans to any group exhibitions and that the work could not be altered in any way. It permitted the artist to borrow the work for exhibitions of their own choosing (Hans Haacke's version of the contract would later stipulate 60 days out of every five years) and it enabled artists to keep track of a work's current location.

Seth Seigelaub said: "The artist contract [was a] modest project... Its intention was just to first articulate the kinds of interest existing in a work of art, and then, to shift the relative power relationships concerning these interests more in the favor of the artist. In no way was it intended to be a radical act; it was intended to be a practical real life, hands on, easy to use, no bullshit solution to a series of problems concerning artists' control over their work; it wasn't proposing to do away with the art object, it was just proposing a simple way that the artist could have more control over his or her artwork once it left their studio. Period. But the broader socioeconomic questions of the changing role and function of art in society, the possibility of alternative ways of art making or the support of the existence of the artist; all these important questions are not addressed here. As a practical solution, the contract did not question the limits of capitalism and its private property; it just shifted the balance of power in favor of the artist over some aspects of a work of art once it was sold."

In 1987 Hans Haacke's "On Social Grease" came up for auction at Christie's. It was the first work of his to appear for resale. Next to the work, displayed on a pedestal, was the contract for the piece. The work went for \$90,000, more than double the Christie's estimate or, for that matter, any previously sold works by the artist.

2.

ALLAN KAPROW

"We are unable to accept rewards for being artists, because it has been sensed deeply that to be one means to live and work in isolation and pride. Now that a new haut monde is demanding of us art and more art, we find ourselves running away or running to it, shocked and guilty, either way. I must be emphatic: the glaring truth, to anyone who cares to examine it calmly, is that nearly all artists, working in any medium from words to paint, who have made their mark as innovators, as radicals in the best sense of that word, have, once they have been recognized and paid handsomely, capitulated to the interests of good taste. There is no overt pressure anywhere. The patrons of art are the nicest people in the world. They neither wish to corrupt nor actually do so. The whole situation is corrosive, for neither patrons nor artists comprehend their role; both are always a little edgy, however abundantly smiles are exchanged. Out of this hidden discomfort there comes a stillborn art, tight or merely repetitive at best and at worst, chic. The old daring and the charged atmosphere of precarious discovery that marked every hour of the lives of modern artists, even when they were not working at art, vanishes. Strangely, no one seems to know this except, perhaps, the "unsuccessful" artists waiting for their day..."

Allan Kaprow wrote this essay while teaching at Rutgers from 1953 to 1961. The Department of Fine Arts at Rutgers, like many schools across the country, benefited from the 1944 GI Bill, which subsidized higher education for veterans. The GI Bill required schools to offer "professional" degrees, the BFA and MFA, regulated by accrediting agencies.

Norman Rice, Chairman of the National Association of Schools of Design said in 1963:

"The pressures on the independent schools have made them all conscious of the competition of the colleges. The substantial reasons for this transformation are not hard to find: after the war and during the flood of subsidized students, "being on a list" was a passport to GI Bill participation and hence survival. The lists were lists of schools the office of education had heard about; and its sources were the accrediting agencies, state, regional, and professional."

The first MFAs were awarded in the mid 1920s at the Universities of Washington and Oregon. Yale and Syracuse, the nation's oldest campus-based art schools, place their first MFAs in the late 1920s. At the beginning of the 1940s there were 60 graduate studio candidates enrolled at 11 institutions; in 1950-51 there were 320 candidates at 32 institutions. In 1960 1,365 students were enrolled at 72 institutions. Ironically, with the advent of the Vietnam War, schools across professional fields started accrediting themselves more rapidly as draft age men tried to avoid military service. 31 new MFA programs opened in the 1960s, 44 in the 1970s. In 1994-95 there were at least 7,100 students enrolled full-time for the MFA; more than 10,000 degrees were awarded between 1990 and 1995.

The professionalization of arts education, spurred on by the GI Bill, created a need for a market-ready representation of "the artist." Starting in the 50s, this was the abstract expressionist painter. The abstract expressionists accounted for the great majority of artist-teachers at MFA programs around the country. William Baziotis and Robert Motherwell taught at Hunter. James Brooks was a visiting critic at Yale. Adolph Gottlieb and Franz Kline taught at Pratt. Kline and DeKooning at Black Mountain. Gottlieb at UCLA. Reinhardt was at Brooklyn College, while Mark Rothko taught at Brooklyn, Tulane, and the University of Colorado at Boulder. Bradley Walker Tomlin taught at Sara Lawrence, Clyfford Still taught at Washington State University and what is now Virginia Commonwealth University, Hunter and Brooklyn, and Philip Guston taught at Washington University at St. Louis and University of Iowa.

A professional degree assumes that a career path exists after graduation. In the case of MFA graduates, the two markets advertised are the teaching market and the exhibition market, but the great majority of graduates will not find success in either.

Schools offering BFAs and MFAs promote the idea that a professional degree will lead to market success by naming the rare alumni who have found it. For instance, The catalog for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago names Georgia O'Keefe, Thomas Hart Benton, Claus Oldenberg, Richard Estes, and Joan Mitchell. By listing the professional degrees obtained by their faculty, schools advertise the teaching market available to graduates. The teaching market is larger, more stable, and an oft-cited reason for getting an MFA, but the number of graduates far exceeds the number of teaching positions.

Art history follows suit by tying the success of artist communities in the market to professional schools. It is well known that the YBAs, or Young British Artists of the 90s - Tracy Emin, Damien Hirst, David Hume, Mark Quinn, etc. - all got their start at Goldsmiths in London. One era at CalArts produced David Salle, Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl, Matt Mullican, and James Welling. In the recent show at the Met, "The Pictures Generation," CalArts and Buffalo State College are invoked repeatedly as the twin centers of gravity of the new appropriationist ethos.

The professionalism of art schools is perhaps most saliently proven by their relationship to gender. Many of the schools that would become modern art schools got their start as finishing schools for women. Their graduates would often go on to become art teachers, but were not expected to become professional artists. But with the accreditation of schools beginning in the 1940s, the new teaching path opened to MFA students became immediately predominated by men. Even today artists teaching in MFA programs are only 30% women, despite making up over 70% of graduates. In the exhibition market, the imbalance is even more extreme.

These new professional degrees have risen in cost along virtually identical lines to those of

other professional degrees. Would be doctors, lawyers, engineers, and architects take on upwards of \$200,000 in debt with the expectation that they will be able to pay it off by working in their chosen fields. Today, the professionally degreed artist does the same despite the low pay of teaching jobs and the low probability of equivalent gallery success.

Lastly, some schools have started to offer classes in "professional practices." At Parsons The New School, BFA students take a required class called "Professional Practices, Theory, and Career" where they learn how to write resumes, apply for grants, fellowships, and residencies, and how to market themselves to curators and art dealers. This is a fairly new development, and one approached tentatively by most schools.

The development of these classes is a reaction to a persistent myth, perpetuated by the pedagogy of art schools, that their primary purpose is not professionalization.

One example of school's anti-professionalist facade is the fact that art dealers, collectors, and auction house representatives have little to no presence in art school pedagogy.

But the anti-professional affectation of art schools is more deeply embedded than that. It arises in the early seventies, from a shift in pedagogical strategies, with a new emphasis on language, and based on the failed anti-market strategies discussed earlier.

In 1967, Hans Haacke began teaching at the Cooper Union. He is largely responsible for the emphasis on critique and a general abstention from "professional practices" or discussions of the market. His approach has been taken up across the country by the generations of faculty following him.

On the West Coast in 1970, CalArts began the Post-Studio Class, a class developed by Allan Kaprow and John Baldessari and now taught by Michael Asher. These artists, strongly associated with the move toward the dematerialization of the art object, developed the Post-Studio Class out of this originating anti-market strategy, despite its proven amenability to the contemporary art market. This class is far and away the most legendary aspect of the school's curriculum.

This attitude has the ironic effect of creating the illusion that the contemporary art school is a free space, unaffected by the market, while the fact is that these pedagogical approaches are, at root, a response to the rapid expansion of the contemporary art market beginning in the 70s and persisting to this day. Art pedagogy today remains willfully indebted to the contemporary art market as it was understood at its inception.

Chris Burden seems to have recognized the contradiction. After 26 years of teaching, he resigned after a student performed a mock re-enactment of his 1971 action, "Shoot" and was not expelled. He said, "I do not want to be part of this insanity... To be a good artist in the

long term, you need to trust your own intuition and instincts. Whereas academia is based on rational group-think."

The pedagogical framework that arose out of his work led directly to a situation where he could no longer justify teaching.

The work of Joseph Beuys is perhaps the best example of how indistinguishable arts education and the art market can be. By setting up a system whereby his discrete works are understood as relics of his activities as an educator, the collapse is made complete.

In 1969 he said, "To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration. If you want to explain yourself you must present something tangible. But after a while this has only the function of a historic document. Objects aren't very important to me anymore. "

By 1979 Beuys was having a retrospective at the Guggenheim. His waste products and not-very-important objects have become historic documents collected privately and by museums across the world.

It is, as the dematerialists discovered, perhaps fruitless and naive to attempt to separate art completely from the market. The market is the primary access point to history, the means by which art is seen and understood by its audience; it is the avenue by which art retains an educational dimension. If these are in line with an artist's concerns, then engagement with the market is probably a necessity. This is definitely not to say you have to make any money, but you do have to contend with the mechanisms by which art becomes part of the art world.

The art world and the real world have at least one thing in common – they are built from debt. The credit card is our history, and it is the history of art. The significance of artists like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Takashi Morikami is nothing if not proof of this condition. This already has the effect of limiting artistic agency, and thus its educational dimension, as the market continues to favor white men over women and ethnic minorities. But arts education need not be part of that problem. Schools, through professionalization and accreditation, have chosen to push artists further into debt, to support a market-defined notion of artistic success, and to misrepresent themselves as bastions of free thought to their students.

Why? When as Kaprow said, "There is no overt pressure anywhere. The patrons of art are the nicest people in the world. They neither wish to corrupt nor actually do so. The whole situation is corrosive, for neither patrons nor artists comprehend their role..."

But the professionalization of schools has effectively propagated the opposite. Schools have

defined a path whereby artists do not so much determine their useful engagement with the market, but assume a predefined role within it.

At best, the pedagogical tradition started in the 70s can open up to this type of conversation. It can lay a critical groundwork that may help artists respond with agency to the market. But by denying that even these conversations arise out of an engagement with the market is intellectually dishonest and will necessarily under serve its students.

If we believe that the educational dimension of art is an important one, a decision each artist makes for herself, should we eliminate accreditation and professional degrees from the current crop of educational institutions? Or should the baby go out with the bathwater and we start from scratch?

And what are ways we could imagine creating a sustainable unprofessional art educational model?

Some portions of this text are unattributed, but come from the following sources.

Art Subjects, by Howard Singerman

Seven Days in the Art World, by Sarah Thornton

True Colors, by Anthony Haden-Guest

Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, by Allan Kaprow