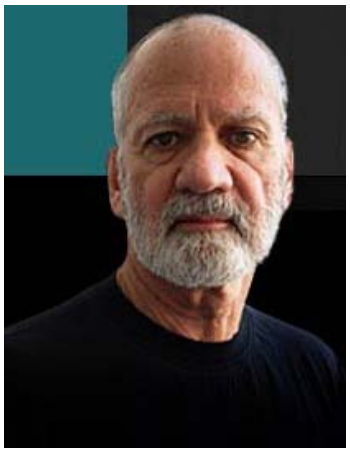
The Absolute Truth About Contemporary Art

Mar 7, 2011 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 hand basket.

I find myself thinking about this stuff lately because I'm now almost 70—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 fetich [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

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Hate and Violence

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.


Are Encoded in the DNA of the American Right
Posted on Feb 27, 2011


Why I Won't be Joining the Huffington Post Blogger's Strike
Posted on Mar 20, 2011


The Zeitgeist Movement
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RANDOM POSTS


The Absolute Truth About Contemporary Art
Posted on Mar 7, 2011


Money and The Meaning of Life – Book Review
Posted on Mar 3, 2011


A New Shade of Green: Interview with Pierre Rabhi
Posted on Mar 12, 2011

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.

16 Comments

Joan Zetka

March 16, 2011

Thanks, Peter, for clarifying a few things. I’ll bet you wear tweed jackets, elbow patches and bow ties. At least I hope you do. I read your essays in Art in America regularly and always enjoy them. Keep on writing–and painting.

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: +2 (from 2 votes)

REPLY

Tiffanie Morrow

March 16, 2011

Thank-you for an article that I needed to read now. I “graduated” from Chouinard Art School at a time of turmoil. Chouinard was changing its staff of brilliant art teachers in a funky setting near Mcarther Park to Hired Cultural guns from NY, eventually to be settled in a boondock nirvana. CalArts…..(I’m not a writer – ha) I tried not to be an arist, I had no money. But, it was my passion, I had to go to art school, once there I knew I had found home. I “excelled”. I’m a woman, a girl then but I was an artist first. I wasn’t a feminist for sure and I didn’t want to be a male artist’s “other”. In time, after working, etc…. I got back to my passion, I had saved money. I made it into a gallery and for ten years received quite a few good reviews, even one from Christoher Knight! I never made enough to pay the rent, some years, not enough for gas. I love to make art, not to sell or have what I do plastered everywhere. The restless anthropologists and philosophers, I soon realized, used art as an intellectual dualing ground. I stopped making art for 9 years after moving to NY, 9 yrs ago. Starting again, thank god. I’ll soon have a place. if small to work – thus nothing I consider art is on my Facebook. Ah, Facebook – it’s how I’ve come to read your article, posted by Ken Greenleaf. Never thought I’d have any interest in the Internet, but…… Facebook is great for me, to reconnect. Of course nothing can replace being in the presence of art, but…. I find great communities of artists. I do not now feel so alone in making art, it’s nice to touch base. You can be an artist as long as you live, with Medicare next year, and still being in good health…….go

Tiffanie

Rating: 5.0/5 (1 vote cast)

Rating: +4 (from 4 votes)

REPLY

Terry_Ward_(GrumpyVisualArtist)

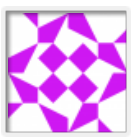
March 16, 2011

seems like writers who haven’t earned such gravitas who dare to probe some of the art world’s workings (other than grousing about art fair crowding like everyone does) get sniped at. how good to have such an experienced observer around willing to say such insightful things.

Rating: 5.0/5 (1 vote cast)

Rating: +3 (from 3 votes)

REPLY



Jeannine Edelblut

March 16, 2011

What a feeling of validation to find someone who has articulated so well what I have been feeling for some time about the “contemporary” art world. It’s not even really contemporary anymore as I saw Vito Acconci doing radical things with video in 1975. The true spirit of contemporary art at it’s inception was to work for pluralism and against the elitism and exclusivity of the status quo art world. Now “contemporary” art has become just that..elitist and exclusive. It is one of those poetic ironies.

Rating: 5.0/5 (1 vote cast)

Rating: +3 (from 5 votes)

REPLY

Carl Belz

March 16, 2011

Yours is a thoughtful and thorough summary of concerns shared here. Took me back to your classic “Pressure Cooker” piece in Artforum and the trip that included a visit with Jake Berthot, I appreciate the fact that you quote him still, as do I.

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: +2 (from 2 votes)

REPLY

Charles Kessler

March 16, 2011

Keep on keeping on, hep cat

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: +2 (from 2 votes)

REPLY

Greg Houser

March 16, 2011

As a long time resident of Minneapolis I guess I missed out on the “Classical Realism” based here. Maybe there are a few wayward eccentric classicists here as in any city …

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: 0 (from 0 votes)

REPLY

Jack Beal

March 16, 2011

Going back a bit further, married in 1955 and moving to New York in 1956 (without any degrees, just wanted to be artists) we got a loft on Stanton Street for $35.00 a month. Worked at part-time and temporary jobs and made art. Sondra Freckelton made sculptures and one day carried a couple uptown to the Tibor de Nagy Gallery where Johnny Myers got so excited that he called Dorothy Miller at MoMA and got her to take two works into “Recent Sculpture USA”. Sondra was 22 (twenty-two) years old. We moved from Stanton Street to Bleecker Street and were asked to be the test-case in the litigation between NY City and the artists who wanted to live in lofts. That matter accomplished, in 1963 we moved to Prince Street and bought into a building with Ray Parker, Peter Dechar, Joe Zucker and Chuck Close. We became involved with a group from the City Planning Commission who were checking out the neighborhood. The thought that perhaps twenty or thirty artists lived there. We went out at night and counted places with lights on – there were more than two hundred and thirty. On return of the commissioners and being told of the results, one of the number said, “Let’s name the neighborhood SoHo for South of Houston”. We protested to no avail. We continued to make art and live like artists, and now we live in the Catskills.

Rating: 5.0/5 (2 votes cast)

Rating: +3 (from 3 votes)

REPLY

Charles Hadley Blanchard

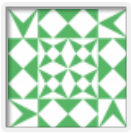
March 16, 2011

Thank you, Peter. A Painter AND a Writer….well, an artist. I weave. Would you like to know how weavers fit in to the "World(s) of Art"? Oh, wait…I must be a "crafter". Besides, any ol' computer can operate a robotic loom. Thank you, again.

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: +1 (from 1 vote)

REPLY



Kate Vrijmoet

March 16, 2011

"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."

Love your cynicism) Yes, I think this is true. I do think that hours in the studio and making art that, as Hughes says, tells us something about the world we live in, is the point. ... mine anyway. I keep slogging away.

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: +1 (from 1 vote)

REPLY

Judy Blotnick

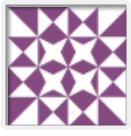
March 17, 2011

Peter, thank you for an immensely well laid out piece. The point about the art world being about entertainment was especially well-taken and one I find most disturbing.
Sure it gets the crowds into museum and galleries and creates buzz but it is an empty meal, requiring nothing to be brought to it. I love technology, love what it can do on many levels but I often want the world to stop and breathe a little. The spinning is giving us a collective headache.
Again, thanks for the fine read.

Rating: 5.0/5 (1 vote cast)

Rating: +2 (from 2 votes)

REPLY



steve gibson

March 17, 2011

Always have enjoyed your writing since the early 70's. Your droll take on the world is always articulate and spot on. Congratulations on your recent exhibition as well.

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: 0 (from 0 votes)

REPLY

Michael Cross

March 18, 2011

In this (still) seriously-recessed economy, the Art Industry becomes just another big business, and like corporations which grow too large, Art tries to capture the biggest market share. Usually this is without regard to subtle elements, more about shiny things.

Those artists of the Ab-Ex era fondly remember when they had very little, but became very creative while still having a bit of rowdy “Bohemian” fun. Today, when dollars dry up, artists notice and react because the wealth WAS there before. No longer are we naive, inexperienced mystics. Art schools want to crank out Winners (duh!) and the only alternative seems to be, well, Losers.

So, we live and work in isolation, even in the biggest cities, not wanting to tip our hand, and with only our chat-friend artists forming our “community”. No need to get too close to other artists. If we liked what they were doing, we’d feel the need to copy it. Who needs that kind of pressure?

Cheers,

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: 0 (from 0 votes)

REPLY

Suzanne Silk

March 18, 2011

Peter, we’re of the same vintage; my cup is raised to our generation. To the ones who are still around + the ones “who could not take it any more”. To the entire generation of Abstract-Expressionists who were teachers + mentors. Here’s to the artists + designers who shared their passion with us + gave much of themselves. We stand upon the shoulders of past generations of art makers. The passing of Leo Steinberg, a teacher of mine, the passing of Mercedes Matter, taught me painting (about Hans Hoffman’s theory of “push + pull” + to the European emigres who were alive+ working in NYC + across America. I toast the Cedar’s Tavern crowd + to Andy Warhol’s “Kansas City” sycophantic world. And to the few that are still happening. Irving Sandler, comes to mind, who sent his students up-town to see great art for themselves. A fully formed + informed aesthetic sense today is a rarity. Some of the art produced in the last 50 years has been over-hyped + over-priced; the epitaph is still to be written. I toast the women of my generation, who have had the “moxie” to make art in the face of a well established patriarchy that goes on to this day. To Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner, Alice Neel + to so many who continue to struggle for far too long. I have great affection for my fellow art-makers + designer’s who are making art, and to the next generation. There are many new + vital talents I’ve “met” through FB + the internet. It takes great courage + perseverance to make art today ! The madness of the world + it’s disintegration on such a global scale boggles my mind; let alone my soul. We both have been graced to live so long to straddle both centuries. Ah Yes, there really was a world before the computer chip + still man goes on slaughtering one-another. Peter, what you had to say; rings true. What continues to save my life is the energy + the will to make art + to make art we must…..It saves us all. I toast ” Truth + Beauty”; in the “Shibui” sense; it has always been my way.

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: +1 (from 1 vote)

REPLY

Steve Metzger

March 20, 2011

Peter: I've been reading your reviews since the seventies, and feel you've pretty much summed it up pretty well all along.

There are those, like me, who couldn't find a gallery when they got their MFA, wound up teaching, exhibiting in co-op's, selling to corporations, movies, TV, and doing public sculpture and other things.

In the 70's, I wanted in. In the eighties, I discovered the "corporate artworld". In the nineties, I started teaching more. Now, I'm pretty much out of touch with what's going on, but I still visit museums, read the art magazines, and go to shows once in awhile.

It's been interesting watching the artworld change, and reading your observations.

Maybe the sunshine muse is too comfortable and that's why serious artists used to go to New York. I have no clue what any of it is all about anymore.

I just try to paint every day and show whenever the opportunity arises.

Keep on writing and making art, Thanks for your observations. Steve Metzger

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: 0 (from 0 votes)

REPLY

Stephanie Rew

March 20, 2011

Thank you for your insights. As a painter of the classical realist style (although I rather dislike that term – it seems to stick to me!), I was recently told that at 39 years old I was 5 or 6 years too late to break into the us Art Market. I have been doing well in the UK for the last 15 years and always believed that if you could make painting your sole income earner, regardless of how low that income was, then you were doing well. Maybe that belief is outdated. As an artist can only improve with time then there should be more respect for the older artisan.

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

Rating: 0 (from 0 votes)

REPLY

Leave a Comment

Name (required)

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About Us

This web site is conceived as a megaphone for those Cultural Creatives among us who see that, as Yeats wrote; “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity” and who have a desire to revision the path we as a nation have wandered onto.

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