

preface

contemporary art and its commercial markets

maria lind

There are many reasons to be conscious of how the conditions for the production and distribution of contemporary art are changing. One reason is that complex and thought-provoking art is having a harder time than ever, not only to come about but also to circulate beyond an already converted audience. Another reason is that entertaining and easily digestible art is becoming more and more prevalent—in the public eye, almost synonymous with “art” itself. Both developments are connected with new power dynamics in the wake of globalization, neoliberal policies of deregulation and financialization, and the boom of the commercial art markets. Some signs of this are that the role of contemporary art as an asset category and status symbol has increased, with growing volumes of sales and levels of prices. Auction sales rose, for example, eightfold between 1998 and 2008. Despite hostile attitudes from many galleries the old divide between primary and secondary markets, between galleries and auction houses, is narrowing, and sales now take place through many other venues too, such as art fairs and the Internet. Not surprisingly this means that the relationships between artists, dealers, and collectors are in flux and that commercial success is gendered (male artists are consistently catching the

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highest prices and stand for the biggest volumes of sales). This affects the “competency profiles” of artists as well as critics and curators: nowadays artists are regularly expected to interpret and market their own work, to actively build up a “brand.”

As commerce and recent art are becoming an increasingly intimate and powerful pair, and as the criteria of economic efficiency invade art production as well as curating, it is necessary to scrutinize the mechanisms at play and what they generate. Because there is no denying that the entire world of art is influenced by these mechanisms, regardless of your proximity to or distance from the drama. Even if you are committed to self-organized and research-based artistic practices that appear to be detached from commerce and you are in a position to choose how to generate income by, for example, having access to public support, these structural changes will have an impact on you. There are certainly other markets in the art world, like the non-profit market of emerging artists and the market of trendy themes, but they have all become increasingly entangled with one another, causing many cultural producers to opt for an escape into the “minor arts,” in an attempt to avoid the “major arts” of the mainstream. In any case, economization in the arts in general, and growing commercialization in particular, is a reality to reckon with rather than to shy away from if you are interested in making space for art to actualize its potential as an indispensable form of understanding and as a means to feed new imagination. *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios* is precisely an attempt to map and analyze

one aspect of recent changes in the production and distribution of contemporary art, namely the state of the commercial art market; to put things on the table which have been sensed and guessed at for a while but for “fear of touching” have not been compiled and openly debated.

Five new essays, a specially written introduction, one already existing text, and a chapter from a novel help us understand and question the complicated and contested entanglements of contemporary art and its commercial markets. The move during recent decades from public care of art to private passion is theorized by Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, who argue that the art market today embodies the “truth” of all price-setting as an operation based on capitalization rather than on production and consumption, as Marxism and neoclassical economics respectively would have it. This argument makes both the art market and the wider economy within a capitalist system truly abstract. Alain Quemin provides data which clearly shows that globalization is more of a mirage than a real effect in the art world. Despite the vigorous rhetoric around geography not being important anymore, and more art events happening in different parts of the world, the most influential geographical zones for the art economy remain the United States and Western Europe with Germany as a stronghold. The augmented role of art fairs and biennials, with three fairs in existence in 1970 and close to two hundred in 2011, is the focus of Stefano Baia Curioni’s essay. Isabelle Graw proposes that we substitute Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of the art world as “relatively autonomous” with “relatively heteronomous.”

In this way the growing influence from other spheres is underlined, particularly the shift from retail to corporate models of production and distribution, and the logic of celebrity culture known from the fashion and movie industries. New sales venues, such as the Internet, and their implications are considered by Noah Horowitz.

Karen van den Berg and Ursula Pasero discuss the importance, economic and other, of the “monumentalism” visible in projects such as Olafur Eliasson’s waterfalls in New York, by looking at new production models and corporate-like studios where many more people and different professions are involved in the fabrication of art. However, large studios where artistic work is outsourced have certainly been known in history. In his insightful introduction Olav Velthuis proposes that the art market is changing cyclically rather than linearly: thus New York and Basel retain their leading positions on the art market, and Sotheby’s and Christie’s are still dominant despite Chinese auction competition. Several circuits of commerce coexist with one spectacular top circuit that attracts the most media attention today, obscuring the others. This circuit is also the subject of chapter nine in Goldin+Senneby’s incrementally and ghost-written novel *Looking for Headless*, which blends fact and fiction, philosophy and offshore finance, and art and mystery in uncanny ways.

The report also contains indications of what the future might harbor in regard to art and economy. Among the predictions are that monumentalism has peaked and that in ten years artists will tend to become on-and-off artists rather than continuous prac-

tioners. Online sales are likely to grow, despite the value of “in-the-flesh experience,” and the art world will be multipolar, with networks of relatively independent regional art centers with their own markets, such as Beijing, Mumbai, and Johannesburg. As they will be based on the liquidity of high-income earners, the commercial art markets will depend on the fate of the finance sector and its performance. If the financial economy grows, agents with commercial interests in art and who are part of the “love-of-art” tradition will continue to promote “privatized love” and to forget about “public good” as a motive. Or, in the words of Malik and Phillips, the “endemic configuration of people, space, and shared but unequal love will be the ever more prevalent shape of public galleries and museums over at least the next two decades as this type of inventive public-private methodology becomes increasingly necessary to maintain institutions in the midst of the decline of state funding for culture.” An urgent question is then how, in light of this coming development, we can prepare and harness as much self-determination as possible for artists and their practices.

The report is published by Tensta konsthall and Sternberg Press on the occasion of the curated project *Abstract Possible: The Stockholm Synergies*, which is taking place at Tensta konsthall, the Center for Fashion Studies at the Stockholm University, and the auction house Bukowskis—all located in Stockholm—at the beginning of 2012. Tensta konsthall is one of many small-scale visual arts organizations struggling to continue supporting genuinely experimental art-making and curating in the wake of

increasingly tough circumstances for fundraising. As a private foundation primarily relying on public subsidies, Tensta konsthall is nevertheless forced to look for additional funding sources, in an economy where the repercussions of changes in the commercial art markets are more palpable than before. All this is in a cultural context where patronage beyond starting private institutions is as rare as needles in a haystack, and where tax reduction for donations is not even part of the discussion.

Abstract Possible is a research project that explores notions of abstraction by taking contemporary art as its starting point. Three main strands of abstraction are explored and complicated in *Abstract Possible*: formal abstraction, economic abstraction, and withdrawal strategies (Latin *abstrahere*: to withdraw). All of these pertain, in straight as well as roundabout ways, to how art is allowed to come into being today and how it can “sit” in culture and society. Furthermore, each strand loosely corresponds with a venue in Stockholm: formal abstraction at Tensta konsthall, withdrawal strategies at the Center for Fashion Studies, and economic abstraction at Bukowskis. The Stockholm manifestation of *Abstract Possible* takes a closer look at this last strand, economic abstraction—art and economy—by accepting the invitation to curate one of two yearly “primary exhibitions” at Scandinavia’s oldest auction house, where the works will be for sale at set prices. The artists Goldin+Senneby have been invited by Tensta Konsthall to shape the framework of the Bukowskis exhibition, and they in turn have invited the poet Mara Lee who has provided a confidential policy poem to

be followed by the staff at Bukowskis. In this way “implication” is a significant trope in *Abstract Possible: The Stockholm Synergies*, which concretely becomes part of that which it wants to discuss. Accordingly, the Bukowskis exhibition will raise new funds for Tensta konsthall, materializing the realities of today’s “entangled economies” and landing right at the center of Malik and Phillip’s discussion about private and public funding. Previous iterations of the research project have happened at Malmö Konsthall in 2010, at Museo Tamayo in Mexico City and White Space in Zurich in 2011.

Particularly over the last fifteen years a plethora of examples of formal abstraction, both geometric and expressive, or gestural, have been visible in art. This work often seems to buy into the idea of ultra-subjective positions and unproblematic aesthetic enjoyment as well as certain visual codes that are taken at face value—as style rather than structure and history. However, in addition to the many cases in art and design today in which geometric abstraction becomes a lifestyle indicator, artists are contemplating and engaging with the legacy of modernist abstraction, also formally, as the result of highly specific artistic and ideological trajectories. And yet abstraction is not purely a formal construction; the concept of abstraction has also—within a Marxist framework—been applied to describe all relations within a capitalist system. This has recently been extended to the logic and distortion of scale engendered by the post-Fordist, late capitalist economy. Working conditions and conditions of production are other salient reference points here. All this is happening within a culture and

an economy in which we literally “live under abstraction,” although the economic recession has more recently put such abstraction into relief. Or as the art critic and theoretician Sven Lütticken put it: “We are the natives of abstraction.”

At the same time it is easy to observe yet another manifestation of abstraction, namely in strategies of withdrawal used by artists and other cultural producers. It is abstraction as a conscious means to step aside, obscure, and enter this formal terrain “at an angle,” often with the aim of creating more space for maneuvering through self-organized initiatives. These developments have been discussed in terms of “strategic essentialism” as well as “strategic separatism.” They can also be seen as a form of “disintermediation,” that is, as ways to circumvent the established distribution channels and their patterns of influence. Sometimes the withdrawal strategies seem to be a reaction to pressures of spectacularization and access, at other times they appear to draw on specific art historical developments. In both instances abstraction is simultaneously a powerful artistic and intellectual technique and an effect of capitalism’s unique forms of value production: it is at once a knowing—perhaps cunning—method and an imposed situation. Therefore, abstraction is, like contemporary art, quintessentially of our time—a time in which the growth and change of the commercial markets and the repercussions of this change are at the same time an everyday reality and a point of contestation.

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