

“When Did Beauty Become So F...n’ Ugly?”

Troubles with Art and Its Functions

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In Jonathan Parker’s movie *Untitled* (2009) we find an insightful (and also cynical) description of some of the major features of the contemporary art world. One of the main characters, Josh (Eion Bailey), is a successful commercial painter who is nicely positioned within the contemporary art market. Josh believes in talent, manual skill, and beauty as vital for the very definition of what art is, and what it is not. His intention is not primarily to earn more money, but to “grow” and to, eventually, become a “great artist.” However, he soon realizes, to his huge disappointment, how the art world—and, more specifically, the art market as its *hypostasis*—really works. Once he figures out the nature of his position within the art market, and the actual character of his business and personal relationship with the young and attractive gallery owner, he utters the words I used in the title of this paper, “When did beauty become so fuckin’ ugly?”

By “ugly” Josh refers to the aesthetic properties of the artworks he does not appreciate and, even more, to the ethical dimensions of the whole business of art (personified in the “beauty/ugliness” of the gallery owner). “When did the art world (or the art market) become so fuckin’ ugly?” could be, I think, another fair interpretation of Josh’s words.

But what is so ugly about art and the art world nowadays? If, based on the movie, Josh by “ugliness” refers to manipulations, hypocrisy, dishonesty, and so on as inherent parts of the

art business, then one can surely say that this ugliness is not specifically related to the contemporary art world; neither is its ideological dimension exclusively contemporary. To accept and appreciate something as “art” (or as “beauty” for that matter), one already has to buy into a certain ideological narrative. It is through the modern, Western narrative about “fine arts” that “art” (as, for instance, something more than *just* a painting) was invented. The concepts employed to describe this new category of human endeavor—which also became a new social institution—were “autonomy,” “disinterested aesthetic experience,” “expression,” “free creation,” “talent,” and so on.

What is, however, different in the context of the contemporary art world is that these concepts—the very modernist definition(s) of art—have lost their assumed innocence. We have become aware that none of these definitions *actually* describes the “nature” of art, and that, moreover, there is no such “nature” apart from the ideological discourse in which something we call “art” functions. It has become clear that the very institutional dimension of art—the art market—is that “nature” of art, and the only possible all-encompassing “theory” of art.

This would not, however, be problematic if such *art as art market* (business) did not continue to rely on the typically modernist ideology of art that includes, as already mentioned, the ideas of art as a specific, autonomous field, which is concerned with human creativity, freedom, self-expression, aesthetic experience, and so forth, up to the point of turning it into some kind of (secular) mysticism. Indeed, the contemporary art world needs the aura of art, and all of these particular concepts, such as “creativity” or “inspiration,”

function mostly as an empty screen for the projection of the spectators' or art collectors' fantasies. They become useful marketing slogans that sustain the story of art (as business).

The movie captures this effectively in portraying a young, rich businessman, a newcomer to the art world, who simply wants to “shop” artworks, thus buying prestige, and a place within the art world and in the corresponding social circles. He is, correctly, instructed that he cannot just walk into a gallery and shop—he needs to “buy” the ideological narrative, quite brilliantly expressed in the words of the gallery owner that by purchasing art one “is not just writing a check” but “writ[ing] the history of Western civilization.” Without that ideological narrative, the whole system collapses. That’s why the system needs to perpetuate its own, tautological definitions of what art is. (And that is why art schools are still necessary, even though they cannot teach you to become a “great artist”—to become one, one should better take classes in managerial and marketing skills, rather than in drawing or sculpting.)

Approached this way, art, as a concept and social function, exhibits all of the major elements of good ideological narratives—its ideological potential tends to be as little visible as possible when it is at work, and it tends to present the very boundaries and/or oppressiveness attached to it as a (new) form of liberation. This is what makes the contemporary art (market) a trustworthy ally of the contemporary global capitalist system. Art is, on the surface, represented as the realm of freedom—all techniques are allowed, there are no a priori limitations as to the media that can be used, no a priori expectations as to what it must look like, and so on. However, in its actual (institutional) functioning it is

highly restrictive and even oppressive. The system is more and more dependent on corporate money. To have access to that money, artists—to take just this category from the complex web of the contemporary art market—often need to go through the limbo of administrative procedures to be able to develop their projects. More importantly yet, they need to develop suitable “stories” (or find someone to develop these “stories” for them) that would please the opulent. In order to become *successful* within the (mainstream) art market (which then becomes normative) one should better take into consideration the dominant political/ideological narratives that the elites (which also includes those employed by the corporate world) might want to see. This makes a good, “sellable” story that fits the dominant ideological framework, potentially a very successful artistic strategy.

This is, however, not a phenomenon that exclusively characterizes the contemporary art world. It is rather a reflection of the broader tendency of turning everything into *business* (within the neoliberal framework), and employing business logic as the guiding principle and the very “nature” of a variety of human activities. Although this logic and the mechanisms behind it (for example, “market forces”) are deeply rooted in a particular ideological narrative, they are often presented as “natural,” “neutral,” “objective,” “rational,” and even “necessary” and “good.” This neoliberal business logic functions as the new, total epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics. In its actuality it is a new type of commodification, which replaces old-fashioned consumerism. The new commodification does not worship primarily material objects that can be consumed or utilized—its central “product” is purely ideological. This is why the embodiment of this logic can be found in

the financial markets and financial derivatives. In these markets nothing is produced, nothing is traded, and nothing is consumed—except ideology itself.

At this point, it becomes clear that the art market exhibits striking resemblances to the financial markets. Historically speaking, art has been following the broader logic of the capitalist markets. In the contemporary version of this logic, *objects* are not central anymore (the way they were in earlier centuries, for instance). Consequently, the price of commodities and the prestige that buying certain commodities brings are not attached primarily to the *real* (for example, material, aesthetic, or functional) qualities of objects. As a result, art can exist (which means it can be sold and bought) even without the presence of any *piece*, without anything material. The real product (artwork), which is sold and bought, is the ideological narrative itself. It is through this narrative, not the qualities of objects, that the price of these works is constituted. And the narrative itself is being sustained by these transactions.

I see a few issues here that, in the absence of more space, I will just briefly point to:

1. Art, as a complex contemporary social/ideological/commercial system, becomes increasingly institutionalized and subordinated to the power dynamics that follow the logic of global capital. Such a system seemingly allows anything while it mostly prevents everything—it marginalizes and even excludes many manifestations of human creativity, either because of the lack of institutional mechanisms that would allow for their appreciation, or because they do not fit the current market tendencies and dominant

ideological models. This means that the system becomes increasingly bureaucratized and, as a consequence of that, more conservative.

2. This becomes even more problematic when applied to global society. Access to the major art manifestations/art fairs is also highly restrictive—emerging artists from the “third world” have little chance to access the global art market, unless their “stories” fit the broader political and ideological agenda of the still Western-dominated art world, and a particular vision of what “good art” is supposed to look like at a given moment. The same applies to the galleries from the “third world” lacking the necessary financial means to play a more significant role in the global market. Even on a more basic level, the very institutional procedures that define what is and what is not acceptable and when, are highly problematic.

3. Maybe it is high time to confront some ethical issues that rise from the realization that contemporary art functions as business and, in some sense, as “pure” ideology, which is, nevertheless, still portrayed in the old-fashioned, supposedly innocent terms of its beauty, expressiveness, autonomy, and so on. Are we not back here to Plato’s problem—the problem of art’s responsibility for the sociopolitical context in which it operates (and in this case that’s the global context)? Much of the “great” art (which more often than not means expensive art), is “great” because of the suitable political and ideological narratives and stereotypes it affirms. And yet, this is possible precisely because this art is presented as a separate, autonomous realm, not as something inherently political or ideological. In other words, art can tell *lies*, perpetuate stereotypes, influence people’s perception of what is valuable and desirable, without being accountable for it, simply because—“it’s just art!” And it is “just art” because it still exploits the modernist

presuppositions about its autonomous nature (which used to be “just” aesthetic), and as such is not in principle subject to other types of criticisms.

4. Maybe it is time for an *anarchist* approach to the art world, which means a critical approach to the power structures that govern the contemporary art market. This approach would imply both local (on a state or regional level) and global democratization and deconstruction of these structures in their manifold aspects. It seems indeed very “ugly” that artworks are sold for tens or hundreds of millions of dollars, in the world in which tens and hundreds of millions of people starve.

5. Maybe it is also time to take seriously Carolyn Dean’s proposal (in “The Trouble with (The Term) Art”) to “discard” the term art as “intellectually unproductive if not actually counterproductive.” It is indeed a concept that masks the issues more than it contributes to their clarification. However, eliminating only the word will not be enough. The institutional mechanisms behind it should be the real target of such a critique. Maybe “killing” art (which would nowadays effectively mean “killing” the way in which the global art market functions) could lead to the affirmation of marginalized and noncommercial works and interdisciplinary practices that explore particular social, political, and other issues, protesting, for instance, the logic of global capital, exploitation, and so on. Ultimately, it could lead to the affirmation of human freedom and creativity outside the constraints of the present institutional mechanisms.