

NEW YORK

# Has Money Ruined Art?

**Or is the hype about the hype keeping us from seeing the real picture? The collateral benefits of this loopy, vulgar, and altogether overheated New York art moment.**

By [Jerry Saltz](#) Published Oct 7, 2007



At the staging of Aaron Young's *Greeting Card* on September 17.  
(Photo: Kai Regan)

I love art and the art world, but lately, I can see why the Gavin Brown gallery has a new Website called [NewYorkIsDead.biz](#). The site's creators say that "nothing's moribund; energy still abounds. But its timbre is strange." Just how strange can be seen, as never before, when the bullshit machine runs at full steam; students charge \$25,000 for paintings; the M.F.A. (as Daniel Pink notes) is the new M.B.A.; and "the system," as David Hammons observed, "is making people offers they can't refuse when it should be making them offers they can't understand."

A large chunk of the art world seems to have drunk the Kool-Aid, too. Megacollectors suppose they can enter art history by spending astronomical amounts. They're P.T. Barnums, showmen and -women who have become part of the show. Art magazines, once left on coffee tables, are fat enough to *be* coffee tables. Ten years ago this month, *Artforum* had 124 pages. This month, it has more than that many pages of ads, and 412 pages overall. Damien Hirst, who once brazenly declared that collectors would "buy what you fucking give them," recently, and wearily, told *The Guardian*, "You just make things and you sell them, you make things and sell them." Addressing the strangeness, the underrated painter Jason Fox recently observed, "In these conservative times, it's easy for art to become hollowed out from any progressive or radical energy and exist only as a bourgeois decoration."

Just how easy can be seen all around. A couple of seasons ago, after Christie's Christopher Burge brought

down the hammer on Warhol's *Orange Marilyn, 1962* at auction for \$14.5 million, the bigwig collector-dealer Bob Mnuchin dimwittedly shouted from the auction-room floor, "How about a hand for Christopher?" Everyone applauded, understanding that art had become a currency to manage. Perhaps it was ever thus; it's just more thus than ever.

Last year, amid the same tent-city casino atmosphere, Amy Cappellazzo, the international co-head of Christie's postwar-and-contemporary-art department, crowed that auction houses were "the big-box retailers putting the mom-and-pops out of business ... After you have a fourth home and a G5 jet, what else is there?" A few months earlier, her cheeky competitor, Tobias Meyer of Sotheby's, effused, "The best art is the most expensive, because the market is so smart." That's exactly wrong. The market is not computer but camera, so dumb that it believes almost anything put in front of it. It's self-replicating: If the market sees one artist's work selling well, it buys more by that artist, driving up prices. Thus, the rush to buy third-rate product from second-rate artists, like the kitschy paintings of Martin Eder, whose prices have hit \$500,000.

The words "New York is dead" rocketed through my head last month at *Greeting Card*, a spectacle staged by artist Aaron Young at the gloriously emptied-out Seventh Regiment Armory. The event, organized by the otherwise admirable not-for-profit Art Production Fund, and sponsored by sundry art dealers and collectors, Target, Sotheby's, and Tom Ford, was attended by over 500 invited guests, including—for a touch of pseudo-danger, I suppose—members of the Hells Angels. A-listers, curators, thin and well-dressed women, up-and-coming artists, and certain critics were given seats. Everyone else had to stand.

With the social pecking order in place, and gas masks and earplugs distributed to the nervous, at exactly 7:45 p.m. (this professionalized art world runs on time) the lights of the Armory dimmed, ventilation fans switched on, and twelve motorcyclists began fishtailing atop 288 black-painted plywood panels, rubbing away the surface to reveal snaking lines of fluorescent pink. Wheels spun, smoke rose, and by 7:55 this ersatz Carl Andre sculpture had been turned into an ersatz Brice Marden painting. Some said they thought the \$220,000 testosterone-fest was not decadent but "divine."

Young, who's made good work but here fell prey to his own hype, told the *New York Times* that he wanted the performance to be "very hard-edged." But *Greeting Card*, though impressively militaristic—it elevated painting to some combination of gladiatorial spectator sport, motocross, and a rock concert—was less hard-edged than Hallmark. As artist Jackie Saccoccio remarked, "Like a lot of things these days, it was more about the funders than the thing funded."

### **Speeding Up the Assembly Line**

Taste has become a cheap high. Many art-worlders have an if-you-say-so approach to art: Everyone is so scared of missing out on the next hot artist that it's never clear whether people are liking work because they like it or because other people do. Everyone is keeping up with the Joneses, and there are more Joneses than ever. When we learn that a Richard Prince photograph fetched over \$1 million or that a Marlene Dumas canvas sold for \$3 million, does it affect the way we think about these artists' work? High prices become part of its temporary content, often disrupting and distorting art's nonlinear, alchemical strangeness. Money is something that can be measured; art is not. It's all subjective. You can't prove Rembrandt is better than Norman Rockwell—although if you actually do prefer Rockwell, I'd say you were shunning complexity, were secretly conservative, and hadn't really looked at either painter's work. Taste is a

blood sport.



**Peter Coffin**  
*Untitled (Rainbow)* (2005)  
 Real-world sources, historical references, and a simple, elegant result.

(Photo: Courtesy of the Elizabeth Dee Gallery)

We have to wonder how the high prices affect curators' thinking, too. Prince is getting the Guggenheim retrospective he well deserves, but the only so-so Dumas is slated to have a show at MoMA next year. (At least more mediocre women artists are now sharing the attention given to mediocre male artists.) And how much of this creeps into artists' minds as they work? Two current shows—that of the good-until-now Paul Noble at Gagosian, and that of the erratic Keith Tyson at Pace—look like the artists have too much money at their disposal and are just making things to sell because they can. The surfeit of money has, as critic Peter Schjeldahl told me, “allowed many artists to lose what should be the No. 1 lifelong fear of all artists: making a bad piece of art.”

Meanwhile, do we think less of an artist whose art sells for less or doesn't sell at all? After all, more than 99 percent of all artists fit into the Lifestyles of the Not Rich and Not Famous category. Can the general public look at contemporary art without thinking about money? Will young artists having 30-month careers be able to also have 30-year careers, or are we simply eating our young? And if money is mainly what people are thinking about, does that mean art's audience will turn cynical or hostile toward it?

One museum already seems to have crossed that line. This summer, Mass MoCA, in North Adams, Massachusetts, allowed visitors to walk through an unfinished Christoph Büchel installation—one whose incomplete status had already inflamed the artist, leading to the show's cancellation and a lawsuit—as they made their way to another exhibit. The museum obscured the Büchel work's components under ugly yellow tarps. When I was there, I paused to look at the tarps for a moment, and immediately a guard approached me and said, “You're not allowed to look. You can only walk through.” It was creepy and menacing. A Massachusetts judge agreed that the museum was acting within its rights and ruled against Büchel. Really, it was as if Mass MoCA was trying to humiliate Büchel, to teach him a very public lesson. Afterward, Büchel proposed switching the letters in the museum's sign to read mass coma, an entirely appropriate gesture. This kind of hostile attitude toward artists from general audiences is familiar; from a museum, it's deplorable.

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### The Melting Chelsea Ice Cap

Before pointing fingers—or meting out punishments—we have to remember that artists generally have nothing to do with what people spend. You can't blame Richard Prince because someone paid \$2.2 million for one of his paintings. Similarly, you can't blame Chelsea and its 360 galleries for the problem, either. (Broadly condemning artists, dealers, and the market is like saying you refuse to breathe the air because it's polluted.)

It's also true that many Chelsea spaces are now so large that they devour almost anything you put in them. By my reckoning, there's more than 100,000 square feet of exhibition space on West 24th Street alone. That's bigger than the Whitney, and probably more space than in all the hip Amsterdam galleries combined. That's fine. But too many good elements can make bad juju. At the moment, three of my favorite things are adding up to less than the sum of their parts. I love Willem de Kooning's late paintings up to 1985; I admire the critic-curator Klaus Kertess; I think Gagosian's new space on West 21st Street is gorgeous. Yet the de Koonings, impeccably organized and installed by Kertess at Gagosian, get sucked up into the gallery's immense space and lose all scale. The paintings turn into postage stamps.

I feel similarly about David Zwirner, one of the best galleries anywhere, which recently added two amazing spaces for art. But having the three galleries in a row rather than on different streets (as is the case with Gagosian's multiple spaces, or Matthew Marks's) is problematic. Seeing three artists at Zwirner in one visit tends to erase at least one. That's happening right now to the Raymond Pettibon show next door to the double Chris Ofili outing. Last spring, a subtle exhibition of James Welling's new photographs was overwhelmed by Rirkrit Tiravanija's living sculpture next door.

But even with all this taken into consideration, Chelsea is a symptom, not a cause. In actuality, the area has a very fragile economic ecosystem. Old buildings are already being torn down, new ones are going up, the High Line is just around the corner, and rents are skyrocketing. If this continues, within six or seven years, the area could be home to only a handful of super-blue-chip dealers who already own their own spaces. Presumably, they'll be surrounded by scores of boutiques, day spas, restaurants, and hip hotels. As leases on many Chelsea spaces expire over the next few years, many galleries will be unable to keep pace with the rents. If Chelsea dissipates as a gallery neighborhood, it won't be replaced in Manhattan, because there are no Manhattan neighborhoods with usable, underdeveloped space.

Of course, it's not essential to have hundreds of galleries clustered. Most art scenes are spread out; Berlin, London, and Los Angeles are, and all are thriving. At its best, density contributes energy. At its worst, it's enervating. A bad day in Chelsea can bum you out for a month, and a few months like that can make you think that 360 galleries in one neighborhood is 300 too many.



**Ryan Trecartin**  
A still from *I-Be Area* (2007)  
Anarchic energy that defies commercial mandates, smack in the middle of Chelsea.

### Only Disconnect: Or, The Changing Same

So are the forces turning New York into a giant mercantile exchange too great to overcome? Are we doomed to being a trading floor but not a center of artistic production? Is a Death Star hovering over the New York art world? Many would say yes. Yet, as with most things, the situation is more subtle than it would seem.

Our moment is marked by a complex disconnect. Apprehension and grossness are tempered by expectation and belief. Cézanne once said, "We are a shimmering chaos," and that's what the art world has become. But chaos is nearly always good for art. In the early nineties—the last time the scene felt a little like this—the confusion came from near collapse: Money left, galleries closed, magazines folded, AIDS blotted out a generation, and

everything seemed like it was ending. Attention fell away from the art world, meaning almost no money or fame was at stake, and there were no alpha art movements driving the discourse.

The past ten years, which began without much money around, were a time of large installations, *Gesamtkunstwerks*, and elaborate journeys into new states of mind. Materials and techniques were unleashed; video and sculpture exploded in a thousand directions. Artists took many of the ideas inherent in the video, sculpture, and performance of the late sixties and early seventies and ran with them. Money was only beginning to return after a decade-long drought, so artists and dealers found ways to raise their own capital, collaborating with scientists, filmmakers, composers, or whomever it took to get the work made. Dealers pooled information, formed informal coteries, maxed out credit cards, and made it up as they went along. They could do so partly because few outsiders were paying attention. Money only caught on later. By then, a new network had formed. In that nebulous lacuna, a new generation of artists, dealers, critics, and curators took the stage and remade that world.

This time, we're in a much larger, internationally linked art world awash in cash. The chaos comes this time from abundance rather than poverty. Yet, even though the art world is paying too much attention to market talk and spin control, a shift is under way. There are so many different ideas and artists coming from so many places that, in a sense, almost anything is valid and in play. Not only does this add to the overall chaos of the moment—it means that, as in the early nineties, there are no dominant movements, no alpha artists hogging the airwaves. (Occasional cool cliques come and go, but they're usually seasonal blips. The collectors who follow these mini-bubbles get so distracted they're out of everyone's hair for whole seasons at a time, and that's nice, too.) Because of all of the activity, many more ideas can pan out. So much art is being made and shown that all of it is contributing to all the other art being made and shown. That in turn creates interesting cross-currents, internal stresses, and glitches, and something is bound to come of it. It's akin to trickle-down economics theory, or maybe trickle-up.

This is not just a case of a rising tide that lifts all boats, however. Aside from the occasional *Greeting Card*-like debacle, young artists are working in new ways that are specifically driven by this overwrought moment. They aren't making giant, expensive, space-eating installations. They're not thinking small or becoming unambitious, but—adept at culling, sorting, reshaping, and plotting information—many are reacting to the scene, innately comfortable with the idea that while there may not be anything entirely new, there is an infinite variety of ways to create unique thought-structures and complex specificities. They're employing a strategy of maximum diversity in minimum or multiple spaces, rather than the maximum diversity in maximum space of their immediate forebears. They're attempting to merge seriousness, process, irony, intuition, language, materials, belief, and thought with lived reality, not just with pop culture. It's the way an artist like Peter Coffin has pieced scores of color photos of rainbows together to make a giant Nauman-esque spiral; this shape connects to a real-life phenomenon, re-creates a familiar shape from recent art history, and remakes something out of things that already existed. Or the way that artist Karl Haendel makes velvety charcoal renditions of photographs of his father, George Bush, old political posters, and personal notes; Haendel weaves together his inner life, moments in time, and collective history in mysteriously alarming installations. Or the way that Klara Liden has walked in circles around a bicycle in an empty room before going at it with a crowbar; somehow you get the absurdity, anger, and the frustration of this urban self-attack. At first, these artists, like so many others, make you react with

Henry Hill's line in *GoodFellas*: "... the fuck is that?" Then they make you think, *Holy fuck*.

Against expectations, all this money turns out to be useful—not just as a lubricant but as a smokescreen. Interesting growth is already occurring within the chaos. Small galleries can open, and while they may not be visible to large numbers of people for years, they are visible to just enough people with money so they can survive without having to toe any line. (This means there'll be more bad art, too, but even bad art feeds the chaos.) Already, pockets of galleries have sprung up outside Chelsea. The Lower East Side has a handful of good galleries, more are on their way, and the New Museum opens there in December. Not all of these galleries are great, but many are trying to be alternatives to the big market. They operate out of storefronts; some are run by artists. Obviously, they are as dependent on sales as any other gallery. But their attitude feels more relaxed. At the same time, another cluster of galleries has appeared on the far West Side between Vandam and Bank Streets, not far from the vigorously revived alternative space White Columns.

But chaos can occur anywhere. Currently, at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery, smack in the heart of Chelsea, you can see the work of a young Lord of Chaos. Ryan Trecartin's brilliantly colored, insanely paced, multi-narrative single-channel videos are some of the wildest things to appear in years. Trecartin is a combination of Jack Smith, Paul McCarthy, Taylor Mead, a drag show, daytime soap operas, and the Home Shopping Network. This kind of anarchic energy has been cropping up more and more—although you have to look for it amid the mass of shows. Last April 27, an artist-curated worm-of-chaos embedded itself in the bowels of a market-hyena. "Beneath the Underdog," at Gagosian, wasn't the best show of the season, but it was rife with frustration and seriousness and provided an alternative to the slickness and market manipulations of Takashi Murakami's exhibition in the same gallery. A sprawling, smashed-up floor ran throughout the gallery; the forgotten and the overexposed shared space. The show was so disjointed that you knew you were being taken into the charged field of the disconnect—that something utterly new and genuinely weird had been given free rein. In an overmoneyed situation, anytime artists take back control, you can see when money is acting dumb and just following the leader. That peels back the curtain, even briefly, and shows how much can be done with a little nerve and a lot of effort.

On July 19, a bubble of chaos erupted again in "NeoIntegrity," a fringey 180-person smorgasbord at the Derek Eller Gallery. Organized by the underappreciated painter Keith Mayerson, it had its own "NeoIntegrity Manifesto" stating, "Commodity is not the reason to produce or appreciate art," and art "has an aura that cannot be contained—it is the result of a man-made alchemy that comes closest to re-creating the soul."

These shows and others like them are, and will be, uneven. But they are reasons to believe that even in times as strange as these, wonderful things happen. It also means we can let the moment play out without panic. Critics can be critical of art, and it won't affect sales much. Artists and dealers don't have to cater to the market, because the market is catering to them. More artists can take matters into their own hands, curate shows, write, and make publications. Although the current tide is lifting more bad boats, the waters will one day recede or the currents will change. For now, it is amazing that a gallery like Mitchell Algu's can exist at all. Algu, whose day job is teaching high-school science, specializes in artists of the late sixties who never quite made it. Although some museum (P.S. 1?) should pay him to curate a space for the next ten years, or he should be awarded a MacArthur grant, for now, the selfless Algu can exist in a small gallery in

a big Chelsea building because this market makes it just possible for him to make ends meet.

Or take an artist-and-critic-run gallery like Reena Spaulings. While its super-hipness can get on your nerves, it is still an excellent test site, in the tradition of the late Colin de Land's American Fine Arts. The good shows at Reena Spaulings help change what art is; the bad ones are just bad. Then there's the energetic maverick Michelle Maccarone, who spends huge amounts of her time at art fairs or in other cities because she doesn't sell nearly as much out of her terrific New York gallery.

The shows in all these galleries aren't automatically better than elsewhere; in fact, they can be as iffy as any. The art world isn't Hollywood. Not every gallery has to open big and get bigger. There's a huge niche for smaller-scale operations that move fast and can react to change quickly. The surplus of money simply means that these dealers can survive the first hard years when they don't have a dime or a clue. Then, when the market dries up and the hype dies down, when a correction sinks many of the galleries and artists currently riding high, good artists will still be able to make art for less than \$50, and audiences will still be able to see art in galleries for free. Things won't be much different; they'll just be smaller.

Art allows us to glimpse what Kafka called "the glimmer of a possibility." Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky, called this "permanent uncertainty." Poet Amiri Baraka dubbed it "the changing same." Those who say everything in the art world is about greed and bad values, who think art has gone to hell, and that New York is creatively dead, need to understand that change that appears to be for the worse stimulates people to change for the better. (After all, the very Web address NewYorkIsDead.biz is creative.) If art has gone to hell, it's gone there because it's interested in that topography and wants to explore and mine its resources. Art is long. The market is not. The market is art minus otherness. "The rest," as artist Anat Elberg recently said, "is gossip."