

A Timeline of Important Events in the Art World of the Last Six Months, or A Farewell Postcard from the Summer When Contemporary Art Was Digitized, Bought Out, Boxed Up, and Shipped Away.

By PETER DOBEY

This article began as a simple exercise in cataloging the major events that took place this summer in the art world. For a month I waded through dozens of essays, pillaged newspapers, scoured websites, and sifted through thousands of tweets. I had a wealth of information to make a timeline of art events to provide an informative guide to a general readership about the events, ideas, and trends that have impacted the visual arts since the last issue of San Francisco Arts Quarterly. Alas, my mind went blank. In trying to construct a history, I ran up against an inevitable dilemma: when to stop? The sheer excess of art events was too overwhelming to make any sense of. The amount of art-related information that is produced, documented, consumed and re-consumed by the realm of Contemporary Art was too exhausting to make heads or tails of. And then it dawned on me; perhaps it is precisely this exhaust that should be addressed. There is an overwhelming number of events in the art world, an excess of artists, and most pertinently, too much that is included under the excessively widening umbrella that is the art world to make a proper timeline of its conditions. What does this state of affairs mean for art itself? How does one define our distinctive period of art if it moves at such an unparalleled velocity of consumption? It may be consumption itself.

Perhaps defining the characteristics of our period is not a matter of importance for artists themselves, and only an issue for art institutions and historians who archive art works and place them into a chronological context. The notion that it doesn't matter how art is categorized, only if it is good or not, has nearly become a platitude (I say nearly because this statement dismisses qualitative judgments made on the basis of theory, a sentiment with which I largely agree). The problem with this statement however, and why the issue at hand is a problem at all, is that it's very hard to discuss works of art without placing them into a historical context. Few artists working today would say that an impressionistic painting is good Contemporary Art, even though it may just be good art. Why? The answer is quite simple: it is not of our time. History is important because it allows us to find where we stand in it. One task of artists is to reflect upon our time.

Periods of art history cannot be summed up by single events or seminal artworks that comprise them. They are made up of an indeterminate number of events and ideas that simultaneously embody and are embodied by, the ideological and cultural zeitgeist; they find themselves in. Indeed, the historical spirit of a given epoch is prone to dispute in a way singular events, such as the sale of an art piece, is not, since the meaningful content of the event is contained in the subject matter itself. The history of an art period is not clearly discernable and is a matter of contentious dispute, not only as to when it ended or began, but if definitive characteristics even existed in the first place. For example, can conceptualism be considered a period in and of itself? Or is it just one way to describe a certain type of art made after, or in the midst of, the period that has come to be known as modernism, the chronology of which itself is up for dispute. Nonetheless, history is only made in hindsight, and if we are to discuss matters of importance to art, we must not ignore that art exists within the larger context of society. Contemporary art is tied to a history.

Some philosophers have begun to argue that Contemporary Art is reaching its end, that contemporary can now be seen as one period among many in the history of art that has come and gone. One might ask, how is it possible for Contemporary Art not to exist? After all, art is being made and it is contemporary. The proposal is made more plausible when one looks at how the word "contemporary" is used. Consider the word "modern" and how, only in hindsight, "modern art" is used to describe a distinct period. No one in the art world would describe good art made today as being modern, because the connotations of the word carry not only historical associations, but associations of qualitative judgment. Contemporary art is good, modern art is past. Art is eternal, but Contemporary Art may not be. However, if this is the case, what did Contemporary Art stand for exactly? What historical and qualitative connotations will it carry in the future? It depends on what we allow to define its past.

Although I find it dubious to suspect that we have surpassed the age of Contemporary Art, I do believe enough time has passed to identify its dominant characteristics. Contemporary Art arguably arose from the advent of conceptual art, with the understanding that art-making no longer needed to be confined to any medium, style or agenda. Most likely, Contemporary Art will be remembered in the same way it is currently described in the closing chapters of art history textbooks: by various trends of post-modern pluralities. It will also rightfully be observed that, although remaining deeply indebted to conceptualism, Contemporary Art saw resurgences in visual appreciation. What is questionable is if the history books will also remember why it became more visual: the art market demanded it. Contemporary Art is unabashedly connected to the art market and the sphere of art professionals that have taken part in creating it, the art world. Art fairs, millionaire artists and outrageous sums of money must be remembered as hallmarks of late Contemporary Art. However, the art market cannot be held totally accountable. State funded museums, non-profit organizations, curatorial biennales, and poignantly, the proliferation of art schools

have basked in promoting art that is simultaneously consumer friendly and unapproachably pretentious. All of these examples point to one glaringly overlooked pockmark on the glib, pristine face of Contemporary Art: its institutionalized core and the replacement of avant-garde sentiment with homogenized, professional conventions. In the past thirty years or so the art market has become increasingly business friendly, marketing works of art as luxury goods and assets to be invested in. At the same time, art has become hip in a way it has never been before. More and more, the art world is caught up in the glamour of pop culture consumerism, a particularly deceptive form of neo-liberal culture that luxuriates in conspicuous consumption and camouflaged professionalism.

Simultaneously, in a predictable backlash against consumerization, curators and burgeoning fields of "visual culture" have tried their damndest to make the viewing of art an intellectual task devoid of fun or beauty. This has successfully manufactured a breed of art that is largely incomprehensible to the average viewer and aesthete alike. The same cultural elitists have aspired to attach an ethical component to art production, and "social practices" flaunt performances of flaccid activism that are never realized in any societal realm where activism is actually needed. The agenda of "social art" espouses that art should consider the totality of society as its canvas, but it seems that impulse was more a determination to consume the totality of the world into art's "empire." Sensing the state of Contemporary Art's lessening merit, the art world has made a series of excursions into political hooliganism.

The double-edged sword of the art world has cut both ways. Consumerism and intellectual masturbation have made art viewing dull and repetitive. An all too often experience is being confronted by mindless Jeff Koon's sculptures in the same room with vacuous works of art that insist on the reading of multiple essays in order to experience them. Shifts in art history have always been attached to technical innovations and dominant ideologies, but the conflicting characteristics of Contemporary Art make it very difficult to pin down. Explicating the driving forces behind the institutions that define Contemporary Art is one place to start, and by now it seems very clear that the defining influence on art is the same as in all other fields; the very influence it simultaneously embraces and attempts to push away: neo-liberal consumerism. The idea that art is inextricable from the master discourse of Capitalism is nothing new, and both the commercial and institutional contexts illustrated here are in line with "end of art" theories that have been around since Warhol. But it looks as though the importance Warhol attributed to consumerism may have been the beginning of the end of Contemporary Art, now in its zenith. It looks as though Capitalism, like art, is destined to be eternal, the problem is that Contemporary Art merged the two seamlessly, and now one can not differentiate between Contemporary Art or commerce as usual. In a recent New York Times article, even Paul Cooper denounced the changing face of art: "It is just like any business in the world now. It is becoming a global enterprise."

In a word, Contemporary Art is so screwed up it might as well be dead. In the meantime then, what are the defining characteristics of our current interlude between Contemporary Art, and the formation of what we can call for simplicity's sake post-Contemporary Art, which is a response to and a prolongation of Contemporary Art. In the wake of conceptual art, post-Contemporary Art can be produced in any fashion the artist seems fit. The dilemma is, while anything can be used to make art, this doesn't mean everything is.

One consequence of combining consumerism with theoretical posturing is that artworks today often convey contradictions between their formulaic production and their proposed agency. Defying logic, one of the defining characteristics of post-Contemporary Art is how its practitioners yearn for their productions to resist categorizations all together, while also insisting they be informed by pedagogically informed subject matter. Furthermore, art is increasingly produced by means of instrumentalized fabrication that steers clear of any marks of authorship, while simultaneously maintaining a façade of uniqueness. Ironically, this has resulted in individual works of art becoming increasingly indistinguishable from other works of art produced by different artists. Two artists work can be nearly identical in form even though they may not have a shared creative impetus (of course, that's only under an assumption that artists today still value self expression over prescribed forms of consumption). Mimicking one of the contradictions inherent to neo-liberal injunctions of "democratization," today's aesthetic sensibilities tend towards the homogenized. Distinctive traits of art pieces today have little to do with ambiguity and more to do with recognizable singularities, which are able to be consumed (and thus categorized) more readily than autonomous pluralities. The paradox par-excellence of post-Contemporary Art is that while art pretense resists categorization more and more, it becomes increasingly formulaic. As anyone who has been to a recent MFA graduate show can testify to, it has become far too easy to box Contemporary Art into familiar categories.

What is sensational about this defining paradox is that the same stratagems used to establish art as an exception to the everyday, are now the very modes making this discerning



Contemporary Art.

act obsolete. Artists' work has become indistinguishable by virtue of an eagerness to be accepted into the realm of the commercial art world. The uniqueness of art is no longer predicated on originality, but on its ability to look like other art. One knows Contemporary Art when one sees it, but ironically, one also knows that it looks like everything else. It's just not special anymore. Acknowledging the formulaic nature of much of today's art is a starting point to understanding what may lie beyond Contemporary Art. To understand the art of the present we must place it in relation to the specific place in history it arises out of.

Accepting the impossible number of factors needed to construct a timeline of the present, I have limited my concern to three fluid themes: **the digital, the political, and the commercial.** These categories are reflections of popular talking points in cultural publications and support an attempt to define the characteristics of the art of our time by observing particularly paradigmatic events.

THE DIGITAL

In line with society as a whole, the drive for satiation via unlimited consumption is synonymous with the production of the art of our time. The nature of digital art and its rapid popularization tacitly fosters definitions of post-Contemporary Art. The distinctive attribute of digital media is that of re-consumption. Its unlimited reproducibility picks up where post-modern obliterators of authorship and originality left off and runs with it. The proliferation of artists' websites has made it so art is viewed more often on screens in documentation form than it is in its more unadulterated form in galleries. Websites such as Contemporary Art Daily have brought about an iPhone aesthetic that has (perhaps unconsciously) been taken advantage of by galleries who use high powered fluorescent lighting that perfectly emulates the LCD screens of iPhones and tablets, rendering the traditional white-wall backdrop of the gallery space obsolete as the white background of the screen has become the de facto gallery wall. New technologies have made it possible for anyone to create and present ideas to the public anytime, anywhere, and often for free, and are able to be co-authored and consumed nebulously, and artists have taken full advantage of these features to produce art. Whether utilized as a means of communication by average users or as a tool by artists, multi-reusability is an incontestable property of burgeoning forms of digital expression. But without indexical boundaries, it becomes impossible to say what is digital art and what is digital non-art without the dictum of art world institutions.

The purchase of Tumblr by Yahoo for \$1.1 Billion ran on the heels of "The World's First Tumblr Art Symposium," put on by the online art publication Hyperallergic.com on March 9th, 2013, in Brooklyn.

On that same weekend, across the East River in Chelsea, the first art piece produced on the smartphone application Vine was sold. "Tits on Tits on Ikea" was included in the project of Marina Galperina and Kyle Chayka "The Shortest Video Art Ever Sold," part of the Moving Image art fair. It sold for \$200 and was uploaded to a USB stick created by its curators by making a hack, essentially rendering it a one-of-a-kind original and eliminating its re-consumability (until the new owner stated that she wanted the work to remain online).

On July 17th, 2013, "XFR STN" opened at New Museum, NYC. The project, facilitated by the museum, encouraged artists to archive obsolete digital media and artwork. It was part of the museum's audacious new media programming affiliated with the non-profit organization Rhizome.

Closer to home, the expansive archives of the Kramlich Residence and Media Collection will open soon in Oakville, California, promising one of the largest art archives of this kind.

The shared significance of these events revolves around recognizing the importance of cataloguing and historicizing these various digital incarnations as canonical manifestations of creativity - that qualitatively transcend the everyday creative activity of typical users. Art world acceptance of these digital techniques substantiates them as part of a larger recognition: digital and web-based artwork as a medium in its own right. In a word, their sale admits them into the gilded realm of art. It must be noted that there is an inherent and curious contradiction to how digital art is slowly coming into the fore: Many proponents of digital art's inherent resistance to traditional forms of exhibition and acquisition also consider it a necessity for these forms to be accepted by institutions and markets that seek to quantify them into conventional modes of artistic production.

THE POLITICAL

The pervading character of today's art productions is often at odds with their espoused political agendas. The art campaign du jour of "relational aesthetics" has persuaded much of the art community into believing that lavish social functions and incursion into other fields count as activism. To quote the Wikipedia entry for "Relational Art," Nicolas Bourriaud, the crowned prince of this 'tendency' states: "(relational aesthetics is) a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context." On the heels of one of the most audaciously fallacious and Bourgeois dictums in recent art history, it seems that art-writing outlets have followed suit by sticking their art world mitts into every domain of natural life. For better or worse, art publications are rapidly becoming sources for timely general news that tend to condense the outside world, simplifying complex political realities by placing them into an arts context. The dialogues that circulate in the art world remain essentially solipsistic and self-absorbed, but with the flexibility provided by the Internet, art writing has attempted - with no lack of diligence - to absorb everything else around it. Surprisingly, the art press' coverage of events outside its scope may finally be that thing which allows for an interrogation of utopian-minded art practice in the face of tragedy, war and civil unrest within its periphery. Two events this summer reveal how art press media has begun playing an integral role in revealing the pretenses of the curatorial elite; therefore conducting a real public service.

Preceding the uprisings in Turkey (but not foresthadowing them, as some art websites claimed) members of the Turkish art community protested the 13th Istanbul Biennale, especially its public program, "Public Alchemy," which has conducted events since February in anticipation of the Biennale's opening in September. The program's mission statement extols, "the ways in which public-ness can be reclaimed as an artistic and political tool in the context of global financial imperialism and local social fracture."

However, the program is also sponsored by the Koc and Ezzacabasi Holding Companies - two top Turkish industrial conglomerates. Considering it was financially motivated corruption and commercialization that sparked the truly public activism of the Gezi Park Occupations, the statement is laughable. On May 10th, 2013, local artists disrupted a performance by the Belgian artist duo Vermeir & Heiremans, part of the preliminary programming of "Public Alchemy." The following day the organizers harshly condemned the acts of the protesters for disrupting their aim to "open up the idea of a real public sphere to all kinds of different voices," and charged the protesters with reproducing, "methods that obstruct freedom of expression." Over 100 members of the Turkish art community responded to this statement with their own, entitled "Call to Rethink the 13th Istanbul Biennial and Response of the Biennial Curators." A passage from the statement reads:

"Whilst pretending to have a 'public' discourse, this applied intolerance towards critical and different voices, the violence towards protesters, and the attempt of detaining a platform member because he was video recording the activity, and calling the police and taking him to a police station and making charges against him cannot be an acceptable attitude."

The division between working artists and the curatorial elite is starting to boil over, such examples reveal parallels that can be drawn between the strife among the elite spheres of society and the inequality within the art world. In a moving display of citizens fed up with the art world's dequalifications of politically relevant grandeur, June 14th, 2013 saw approximately 100 protesters evicted by police after disrupting Tadashi Kawamata's "Art Favela" in front of Art Basel. The fair's organizers called in the local police, who used tear gas to disperse a crowd that had come to protest the installation, a distasteful replica of Brazilian slums set up in the middle of the hedonistic spending spree of the world's most affluent art blowout. As art writer Mosafa Heddaya put it, "a project not unlike building a waterslide on the sun."

Many of the protesters had no connection to the art world. Others did. But it is important to note how obvious the pretentiousness of the art world is to outsiders. While much of the world suffers the grave consequences of the ravages of Capitalism brought on by the same leisure class Art Basel caters to, the organizers had the insensitivity to showcase this ostentatious installation front and center in a wealthy and trouble free European city. The duplicitous behavior of calling the police to remove all traces of public demonstration from an art piece advocating political awareness is exemplary of the intellectual dishonesty of the curatorial elite. They are finally getting public recognition for the fruits of their labor: everyone knows they are assholes.

As the summer wore on, the art blogosphere accomplished something quite remarkable by setting off a public outcry over the proposal to sell off the Detroit Institute of Art's collection. Calling to liquidate DIA's art collection in order to appease the city's creditors was a misguided effort to stave off its bankruptcy filings, the largest American city ever to do so. A number of online arts writers lambasted Christie's and the city's emergency manager Kevin D. Orr for the indefensible statement of not leaving "any asset off the table." That is, until the New Yorker's Peter Schjeldahl defended the sales in the name of shielding the citizens of Detroit from further fiscal pain, penning, "Vita brevis, ars longa. Art will survive." Suggesting that the hands that circulate art need not concern us, as long as art remains on public display. Only to have Hrag Vartanian of Hyperallergic.com plea for the art critic to be fired, which prompted Schjeldahl to retract his statement in a supplementary article where he concluded: "Still standing is my will to distance the values of art, as art from those of art institutions, which are often inimical."

The deeper flaw in Schjeldahl's original argument is that he naively assumed (before respectively correcting himself) that art would not lose its public value by shifting hands. This is a grave mistake. Probing the DIA's plan more deeply we can see that its controversial nature is firmly rooted in economic inequality. The collection can be viewed as both a cultural treasure that belongs to the citizens of Detroit and a bourgeoisie luxury, thus dividing the debate along class lines. The moment art is released into the hands of the market, any public control over it is lost, now that it has entered the capitalist realm of art circulation. This mirrors art writer Ben Davis's polemical, "A Modest Proposal for the Art World" (Artnet.com 2006) and prompted his later argument that if art prices continue to soar as the one percent absorbs more and more wealth, public institutions like DIA will be the inevitable casualties. Here again, we can see how the clever and provocative politics and sanctity of art posturing articulated by Schjeldahl and others in the name of supporting the public falls flat.

THE COMMERCIAL

Nowhere is the relationship between socio-economic factors and the art world better explicated than in Ben Davis's book, "9.5 Theses on Art and Class," published on July 9th, 2013. The book fleshes out arguments that began in pamphlet form in collaboration with New York artists William Powhida and Jennifer Dalton's 2010 exhibition *ReClass*, a month long series of events that examined art's relationship to the market and class through various artists' participation.

Like so many who have witnessed the futility of art world attempts at activism, Davis realized the participants, himself included, could not find the right footing to tangibly address the grave matters at hand. 9.5 Theses takes the issues laid down in his pamphlet, a veritable index of the economic inequalities that plague the sphere of Contemporary Art, and successfully constructs a set of principals to rectify the often-well meaning but misconstrued efforts of artists to take on economic inequality and other political issues. Twisting the usual Marxist approaches art theorists love to apply, his productive approach relies on an erudite line of thinking that addresses economic inequality in the art world from a relational perspective. With sincere ingenuity, Davis finally pulls off what is often overlooked: a consideration of how artists are positioned in relation to the distinct character of class relations and labor unique to the professional world of visual arts.

His principal assertions revolve around an understanding that class is determined by the relationship different kinds of labor have to the economy they are in. Artists' societal disposition is predicated on the relationship their labor has to the economy of the art world, and the market ends up on top, inevitably dictating the course and nature of art itself. Artists are divided between their own desire to create and the desires of the ruling-class values of the art market, which their position as producers is subjected to and which is outside of their control. The only production artists can shut down is their own, but they have no control over the circulation of their work, once it leaves their hands. The proprietors of the art market perpetuate this predicament by acting the part of benefactors by superficially privileging the semblance of an artist's integrity over fair working conditions and compensation. Artists are either forced to vindicate these practices or are acquiesced by wining and dining into the position of courtier class subjugation, to use Dave Hickey's excellent analogy.

Davis critiques theorists and artists for silently participating in what they are supposedly critiquing, rather than acknowledge their predicament openly. Both Davis's book and *ReClass*, were in large part provoked by a drawing of Powhida's that lambasted the nepotism of the art world via a pictorial critique of New Museum's 2009 exhibition of the private collection of Billionaire Dakis Joannou, curated by one of his most favored artists and best bud, Jeff Koons. The artwork shed light on the all too cozy relationship art institutions have with wealthy collectors and the reliance artists have to maintain uncritically with their colluder patrons who control the circulation of their work.

This vicious cycle was no better exemplified than with the case of the aforementioned drawing. The artwork, originally created as a scathing exposition of the inequality fostered by ultra wealthy financiers such as Dakis Joannou, ended up fortifying the same market it attempted to derail. Shortly after the New Museum's ethics were laid bare by the artwork, a limited edition found itself in Joannou's collection.

In William Powhida's show "Bill by Bill" that took place in April at the Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, he again critiqued the art world, this time by creating a showcase of indubitable trends in Contemporary Art. By seamlessly fabricating art pieces that are startlingly indistinguishable from the formulaic art seen in blue chip galleries, art fairs, and MFA shows across the globe. The brilliance of the show relies on the fact that viewers (and supposedly collectors) cannot tell the difference between the satirical works and any other contemporary artworks. When sold, the parody artworks get circulated back into the art markets that have engendered their form in the first place. This exhibition provides enduring food for thought as a way to contextualize the circumstances under which art is made today. It's

portrayal of contemporary works of art as homogenized and indistinguishable commodities can help today's artists and art students digest a harsh reality; the art works and theories they consciously or unconsciously create may be mere props to feed the allure of the art market. "Bill by Bill" provides substantial testimony to the notion that Contemporary Art as a historical period is suffering through its slow death at the hands of commercialism.

The real nail in the coffin came as the summer season drew to a close. On August 6th, Amazon launched Amazon Art Marketplace, giving web shoppers access to browse over 40,000 pieces of art from over 150 galleries and dealers of dubious aesthetic judgment. Mainstream news outlets instantly preached the virtues of Amazon's use of technology to democratize art, and businessinsider.com ran this incredible headline: "Amazon's New Art Store Is Great For Young Buyers Who Don't Care About The Gallery Experience." Under the article were these reassuring bits of text:

"Disclosure: Jeff Bezos is an investor in Business Insider through his personal investment company Bezos Expeditions.

SEE ALSO: Detroit May Have To Sell These 11 Masterpieces To Ease Its Debt Problem." The most important argument was never touched upon: the dilemma of art itself being tailored to commerce, the dilemma of Contemporary Art. That period of art that has brought us to this pinnacle of ensurance with commerce in the first place. No, Amazon has not killed art. Art as such is something one does to experience the world, it is an intrinsic part of human creativity and what it is to be human, but Contemporary Art is not necessarily so. Only history will tell, but it appears that the lifespan of the experiment of Contemporary Art has been sent on an expedited death by the same persuasive driving forces that Warhol started it with: consumerism and pop culture.

If in doubt, just check out the video for "Picasso Baby," Jay Z's attempt at performance art on July 10th, 2013, in New York's Pace Gallery where, touted and cheered on by such (former) artist hero-cum pop stars as Marina Abramovic, Jay Z waxed eloquently about the virtues of artistic creation by rapping about his forays into art collecting.

So there you have it, the summer that just might have finally driven Contemporary Art over its precipice. But should we be heartbroken? After all, the perpetual existence of Contemporary Art was never promised. For all of you who might really miss the Contemporary Art parties when they are gone, your yacht has not sailed! An extra special feature of Capitalism is that you don't notice when it erodes everything worth living for!

Perhaps I am being overly optimistic about the end of it all. Capitalism will most likely continue its destructive march, so why am I not too pessimistic to believe that the commercial fuck-fest of Contemporary Art will not live on perpetually, ad nauseam? Perhaps because I have seen art of many different periods, I have faith. Only God knows if Contemporary Art was nothing more than consumerism in disguise. It could be that this thing that we have spent so much time studying, gone so deep into being to be part of, wrung so many hands and hearts to get ahead in, and have spun so many elaborate arguments about, could be exactly what we were hoping for: an art of our time.