

## Art Becomes a Commodity

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By Kovach Imre and Murray Hunter

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Can find a Damien Hirst cheap

The financialization of the art world and the cannibalization of creativity

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While astronomical prices for art have been around for decades, today business opportunists have commodified art as never before — dealers who see art only as a means to make profit. In this new world, art trading globally is **in excess of US\$66 billion** and growing exponentially, as more institutions become involved. Art is no longer bought for appreciation but rather bought for resale.

Often such art is produced by apprentices in major artists' stables without the artist himself ever having touched the piece beyond coming up with the concept, raising questions why the value of such commodity art should be any higher than that produced by bootleg artists copying pieces in Shenzhen, across the Chinese border from Hong Kong for a fraction of the price. Dafen, for instance, is home to more than 1,200 galleries crammed into less than half a square kilometer in a few tightly packed suburban blocks in Shenzhen's northeast. Their skill is such that their copies are virtually impossible to tell from established artists in the west.

Nonetheless, as stock markets have lost value during 2015, **art prices are rising rapidly**. Contemporary art today is regarded by many as one of the best **means of wealth preservation**. Ultra-wealthy collectors can't get enough new art and are putting pressure on galleries to produce more art of the right names, which are like **brands** in this market. For the right kind of art, this means that post WWII and contemporary art has multiplier effects which has never been so high. Collectors are going into a frenzy over these rapid rises in values, driving the market even higher and raising the inevitable prospect of a major bust.

The best contemporary artists like Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, two of the highest priced, are owners and directors of "art factories" which typically create pieces without the artist ever

touching them. The artist develops the concept and presents it to his team of technologists, assistants and manufacturing experts. Most often a computer model is pre-made of the plan. The concept for many pieces are represented not by sketches or drawings by the artist, but by an object. He or she may select from a store or any other place he finds them.

Jeff Koons for example, likes to find souvenir items from gift and toy shops and style these pieces into extravagant pieces using the latest technology. Thus the tiny toy becomes a 2.5 meter shiny stainless steel object which can be sold for tens of millions of dollars.

Such art factories are extremely reliable in their production and can consistently turn out branded products. Art galleries and collectors vie for such pieces even though their prices are astronomical. Today even lesser known artists maintain factory-style production, with their pieces booked in advance in massive quantities.

There is an even newer trend that tries to exploit the expected multiplier with the works of very young artists. These young artists are drawn into full scale professional art production by galleries, right after they complete their MFAs, possibly even before their first solo exhibitions. These artists are thereby coached by the galleries, who very actively participate with the artist's work in developing concepts, and arranging manufacturing, etc. The desired end can be reached with continuing rising prices and increasing profits for the galleries – a cycle of profit making.

Collectors happily buy in, possibility in the first and second rounds, expecting double triple or quadruple multipliers in subsequent sales, which no other commodity market can generate.

In addition, the art of such emerging artists is often bought in bulk –100, 200 or even 300 pieces at a time, with the hope of massive profits on successful branding of these young artists. The definition of good art is that it is saleable and the definition of a good artist is that he/she is marketable. In the financialized art world today, those artists are considered the best.

Today's art is finance driven. The creation of artistic style equals the creation of a brand, *i.e.*, brand Andy Warhol. Such finance driven art over the last few decades has shown truly incredible growth by becoming a new asset class that produces more profit than any other known asset class today.

However this new financial high has created a moral abyss. The new buyers of contemporary art who come from the business world are based in completely different skill sets to the art world. Consequently, they have brought with them completely new techniques of management and money making to the art world, used in other fields like real estate, and commodity trading, etc.

These unscrupulous methods, often bullying or coercing artists into one-sided contracts, using legal and other administrative devices which the artist cannot cope with, or outright cheating of artists, are not in the interests of young artists. Some very ugly cases are coming to light about how the so-called collectors are treating the artists.

Today a number of cases are coming into light, showing the dark-side of the financialized art world. However, there is an effect that influences the core of our culture and the immune system of our society. Artists ever since they emerged from shamans and healers have always been investigating the nature of the world, been the seekers of truth, and the philosophers of life. As such they often represented the highest form of intellect and culture in society like the famous Sufi poet Rumi, who was also a religious leader.

Artists always attempted to go beyond the bounds of normal art to unbind the secrets of the world, depict the true meaning of life and ponder on the true purpose of existence. In Europe, Durer, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Parmigiano, and many others were involved in alchemy, mysticism, scientific research, and medicine. In general they had open creative minds which very few people had in their respective societies at the time. Calligraphers were often teachers of Chinese Emperors, who often asked them for their wisdom and advice, and many of them like Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, were excellent calligraphers and painters in their own right.

The same cannot be said of an MFA graduate who is coached and instructed by a gallery for the sole purpose of making saleable art for a profit. It is significant that many of the new galleries led by ex-curators are becoming integrally involved in creating artwork which is way beyond the role of a gallery. They give curatorial guidance to the artists which in many cases gives the upper hand to the curators, where the artist becomes a mere executor of the

curator's concepts.

It is **4** that artists themselves cannot apply to the Venice Biennale, where only curators who have the **Views Left** the curators know art and artists, and also know the buyers. Hence, they are the key figures, the active agents of the financialization of art.

Putting it simply, the financialization of the last segment of society that had the potential to produce creative free thinkers, who are not directed by profit making financial intentions, is being wiped out in front of our eyes.

This matters because only free thinking people can be the '*compass*' of society. Artists through the ages have always commented on the ideas, aspirations, and events going on around them. This is being lost where the last bastion of intellectual freedom will have been commercialized by the ultra wealthy and sectional institutions within our society. Creativity is now controlled by financial interests as soon as a creative artist has any professional success.

We are all going to be passengers on a boat with perfect technologies, perfect crews, and perfect stewardship leading us. However in this perfect world there will be nobody who can question the bearing and direction that the boat will travel.

**Kovach Imre** is an independent spiritual teacher, thinker, calligrapher, painter, and sculptor. **Murray Hunter** is a Thailand-based Australian academic.

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