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# What if China Steals Modern Art?

By Belle Le Triste

Reposting this bloated commentary on recent art market trends by a pungently named French art writer.

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What if Chinese sovereign wealth funds buy the UK artworld and then 'steal' modern art like NYC stole it off Paris? China and Korea are already strip mining UK art schools student by student in the guise of bailing them out with exorbitant fees, and forcing english-as-a-native-language dinosaur didacts to speak really slowly and explain very clearly concepts that they would normally prefer to bolt through before passing the mic back to Hans Ulrich.

Will it be long before in UK art schools, as in US universities' IT departments, Asian students are barred from accessing key information? PIN codes for the art history section, pay-by-the-minute tutorials or the introduction of the Lacanian 'short session' as the only way to prevent a) the rivalrous export and assimilation of UK art/culture knowledge, b) the discovery that the subject presumed to know is dependent on the lack in the big Other and, if listened to really closely, the fundamental absence of substantive ideas will be revealed? At this point, the lesson will have been fully learned and the emperor's new clothes can be packed up and shipped off along with the urinal, the shark and the rest of the apparatus. Not that this discovery of the 'nullity' is to denounce art as null, on the contrary, it's character as 'self-annihilating nothing' may be its best and only hope for criticality, but the misrecognition of the degree of nullness makes for dull art and keeps the would be non-null nugatory. Viz the shark which is altogether too obese a work when set against the already vanishing thinness of Duchamp or Warhol. Same would go for the political and relational works of our repentant era or even the scabrous adusting of the Chapmans, its naughty superegoic underside.

[And this is not to suggest that Martin Creed's 'instinctive anti-materialism' is in some way skinny. His work too is bloatedly otiose activity on the order of sorting one's rubbish for recycling or voting Brown/Cameron, etc, hence - just as when his neon signs announced the recycling of urban space for 'productive' use (luxury delis, neofolk yuppy bars etc), his work is akin to those 70s energy crisis reminders to turn off the light after you have eaked enough out of it to read your heating bill. Conceptualism as making do with the ideas someone already had. The non-reproduction - ie the repetition without expansion - of conceptualism is as fat with cliché and pre-fabrication as the regurgitation of expressionism, pop, and so on; in fact recycling itself is more interesting and radical than any of these much repeated gestures since it realises the situationist call for an art of situations while successfully marrying this with the Kantian 'purposiveness without purpose'. Almost. We live in an economy comparable to the Groyasian soviet experiment, a vast living artwork dedicated to the imitation of productive activity that, nevertheless, has the form and (class) violence of an economic imperative. (Unlike the soviet union our collective rituals take the form of invoking, wooing the destruction of value and production - cf Margate Exodus's flaming Waste Man or Gormley's equally abysmal Angel of the North which gloats sentimentally over deindustrialisation like a winged toad; where agricultural revolution prior to capital accumulation was rehearsed in the theatre of industrial fantasy in Russia and China, in the UK today art rehearses the definitive dismantling of the productive forces and the dream of social cohesion through voluntary collective servitude, praying for a nation of recyclers united in the reduction of their consumption to a homeostatic minimum. As has been noted on this site before, the productivism of the former 'experiment' remains horribly intact in the new anti-productive economy, making clear than ever that capitalist production is not coincident with the needs of its human beneficiaries).

Here the objective futility of social life outstrips Creed's Dubailand islands of 'anti-materialism' (cf Baudrillard - Disneyland exists to make us think that outside its fantastic circle there is such a thing as reality); art lags behind capital's enormous acceleration of pointless, unproductive and coerced activity. Yet art at least has the possibility of protesting against this as part of its privilege and, furthermore, it is not quite yet literally compulsory to look at art, whereas working or recycling both have this hardwired. Unfortunately, however, art is too busy protesting against the occupation of Iraq in the name of a statist democratic fantasy (Wallinger, Gillick, etc) to get anywhere near the sharp end of its powers. Instead, more conscripted false activity reproducing the illusion of 'representation'.

The recent emergence of art organised around counter-discourses of moral exhortation ('Fusion Now!') only confirms the extent to which art's productive forces have become confused with the expansion or contraction of technological development - while it is conceivable that after The Triumph of Painting and of art in general we are about to enter a period of worried discussion about the spectre of 'Peak Art' - a return to the old 80s endgame again in which the corpse searches confusedly for its pulse, forgetting it was always already dead to this world, when at all healthy].

But these aesthetics niceties aside, for the moment it is the business end of the business that seems to be sensing the Asian threat (see below), with the artists themselves apparently limping along hamstrung by the illusion that they need to learn something from the clapped out dynamos of the west, that they are not already in an absolutely singular and one might say avant garde position with regard to their supposed teachers. But the Hegelian overcoming of this Kantian error and the discovery that to posit a limit is to have moved beyond it will presumably see an abrupt reversal akin in significance and scope to the end of the US-Chinese dollar recycling programme's own now quite conceivable copernican revolution.

In the end, London's epicentrality is an epiphenomenon of a creaking financial/military architecture; the same logic in the realm of the aesthetic will see a transvaluation of cultural values but not without an initial wipe out of all that has been overvalued. What will survive? Even Dave Hickey concedes that most of the market is dross - but can there have been any gold extracted in the last thirty years, the post-conceptual bubble economy? As art's status as an asset has inflated, its position as a primary force of production may have dwindled to the point where its erstwhile commentary on its own impotent refusal has somehow lost even this Bartleby-esque force of in-difference.

But this kind of discussion is better reserved for the art school or artfair (as Frieze editor Jennifer Higgie points out with nigh Kantian disinterest, Frieze is a world class forum for the intellectual discussion of tasty new artworks and the big ideas du jour such as Ranciere's blinding insight that eg art may present an interstitial point of critical leverage within the wider marketplace; art is better than a poke in the arm with a sharp stick (or sentiments to that effect) etc etc; Out in the auctionhouses, the important thing is to know and occasionally indicate that discourse still circulates around the nullity - no tightening of liquidity yet observable in the circulation of art writing or even its supposedly dignified and critical elder (or is it youngest?) sibling, theory.

ps since art is always built on something virtual and non-existent, its germinal nothing, it is the attempt to make this substantial that chokes most art at birth; again the point is not that art is just an empty conspiracy a la Baudrillard's diagnosis or in the (supposed) style of SIVs and other soon to be demonised forms of financial 'smoke and mirrors'; like money it is a nothing with real effects, not a simple veil over the void but a veil which makes what it conceals exist - at least for a time - and which is essential to the perpetually shifting realisation and/or destruction of the value that would not otherwise have any existence whatsoever. Like Maddie or The Canoeman, art can shift units or even produce reflection without having to have a determinate ontological status; however, unlike other virtualities, except perhaps that of labour-power?, it is at odds with its own productivity and reminds

us that this very prolixity and productive fluency - pace Beckett - is bound up with atrocious compulsion and unfreedom equal to its apparent ebullience. Art and labour-power are both set on their abolition and realisation, and even if the centre of this struggle shifts to the east the struggle itself unfortunately will continue.

B. L. T.

## London is 'epicentre' of art trade

By Peter Aspden, Arts Correspondent

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London is driving the growth of the international art market, helping to double its value in just four years.

A report commissioned by the European Fine Art Foundation underlines the capital's contribution to worldwide art sales – worth €43.3bn in 2006, a rise of 95 per cent from 2002's figure of €22.3bn and the highest total ever recorded.

The boom has been especially pronounced in the UK, which has 27 per cent of the global market and is one of the world's fastest growing sectors. Sales have grown by an average of 31 per cent over the past three years.

Many wealthy Russian, Chinese and Indian collectors have been attracted to the London market, while young, bonus-rich City high-flyers had helped to fuel the boom in contemporary art.

Technological innovations have also propelled it, with the internet increasingly used as a source of prices, promotion and marketing. A section of wall from London's Portobello Road decorated with a drawing by Banksy last Monday night raised £208,100 in an auction on Ebay.

But insiders claimed that cherished frontrunner status could be under threat both from the mooted tax crackdown on "non-doms", which could lead to an exodus of wealthy people, and from a resurgent China, which has seen a 100-fold increase in turnover in the contemporary auction market between 2002 and 2006.

Against that backdrop, experts say, London could struggle to hold its own, despite the appeal of new British contemporary art stars such as Damien Hirst and Banksy, as well as enduringly popular traditional names such as Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, who have helped to give the capital an edge over some international rivals.

"There is no doubt that that the presence of a lot of very rich people in London contributes substantially to the success of the city as an art market," said Anthony Browne, chairman of the British Art Market Federation. But Mr Browne cautioned: "Art is a global and mobile phenomenon. It doesn't have to be sold in London. The growth of Chinese auction houses recently has been phenomenal."

The report, "The International Art Market: A Survey of Europe in a Global Context", by Clare McAndrew, an economist and editor of the financial quarterly magazine "Wealth", showed that individual transactions were also up, by almost a quarter, over the same four-year period.

Part of the reason is art's appeal to investors amid increasingly tough regulation of more conventional investments.

Here, too, London has an edge, the report suggests, describing it as the "epicentre" of the European art trade.

"The UK has always maintained as open a regulatory regime as possible, and its free market ideology has helped the art trade to flourish," it said.

The UK was also the largest importer and exporter of art in Europe, with figures of €3.5bn and €5.4bn respectively in 2006.

But the report warned that the introduction of resale royalties in February 2006 could damage the UK art market: "Although it is too early to show the real effects of the directive, which was also introduced at a time of unprecedented buoyancy in the contemporary market, it potentially affects a sector that is particularly vulnerable to international competition."

And that is not the only cloud over the horizon. The UK market is second only to the US market, which saw sales worth €19.8bn in 2006.

But China is breathing down its neck. The country's art boom of 2006 "was a result of the combined effects of enhanced demand from wealthy Chinese and western buyers and a boost in supply with a much larger amount of works coming on to the market," says the report.

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