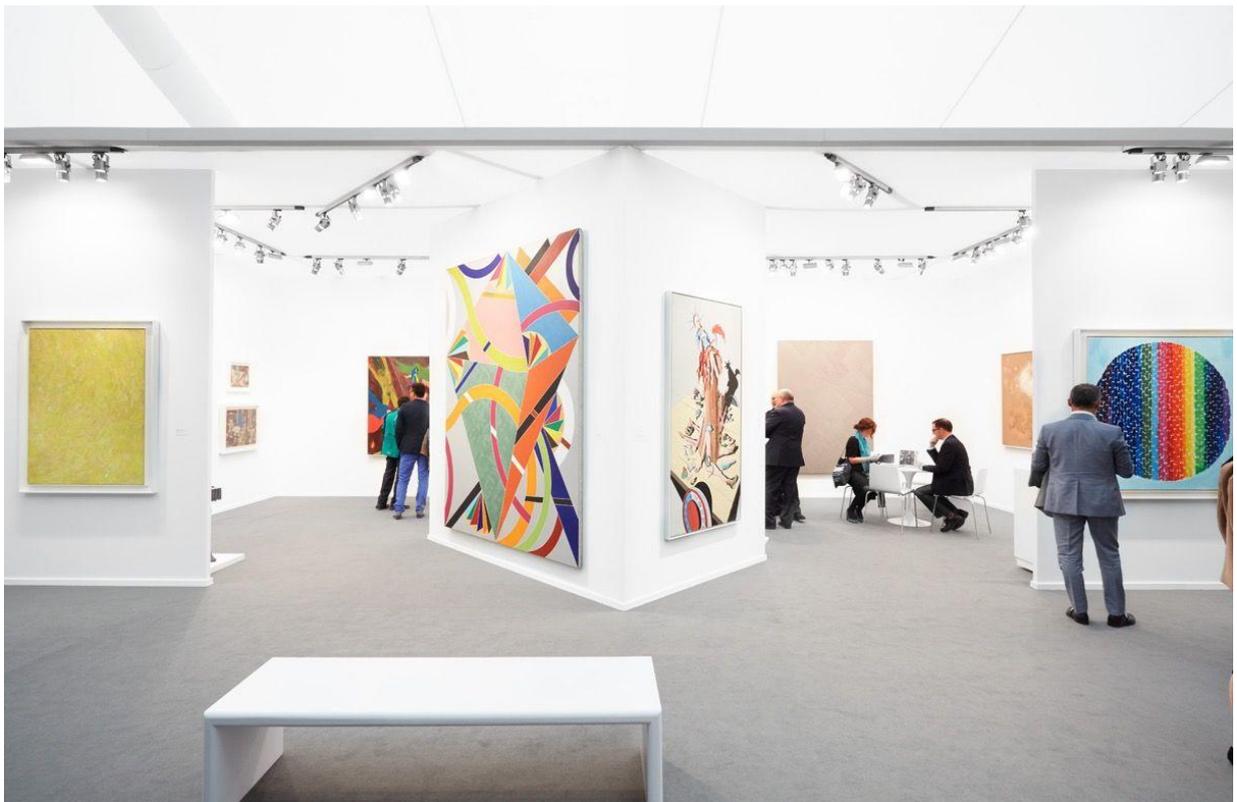


Manifest Opulence, Manifest Destiny

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Assuming that you are reading this at the Frieze Fair, and you are not one of its guests or workers, you have just paid a hefty fee to visit a mall. Why? For the privilege of seeing, but probably not buying, the wilfully eccentric conversation pieces with which millionaires and billionaires decorate their rooms; perhaps for a chance to see the rich themselves, not so much the 1%, as Andrea Fraser has pointed out, but the 0.1%, though most of them will have fled following the collectors' events or be confined to 'VIP' areas; or to glimpse other celebrities—the artists, buyers, curators and even dealers who feature in the gossip and lifestyle magazines. Or perhaps to take in the intellectual garnish which is laid lightly over the business of selling.

Over the last decade, art fairs have assumed a vast and novel importance in the art world. It is telling that these pop-up malls should have acquired such significance: it points to the way that investment in art (as a hedge in the material goods which may produce a return when stock markets remain rocky and interest rates flat) has become mostly a decision of rational calculation. Similar changes have affected many realms of cultural life, such as newspaper or book

publishing: what was once an activity from which money was made but that was nevertheless valued in itself became driven primarily, or even solely, by the maximisation of profit. Substance came to matter only insofar as it generated profit, and the spectacle of marketised art—once believed to be deeply meaningful, even to be an expression of its age (and how quaint that view now seems)—was hollowed out at its core.

What, in any case, does the fair involve? The mobile, event-driven global art world has become ever more environmentally damaging. In the culture of digital flows, social distinction is manufactured by couriering heavy lumps of matter all over the world. Collectors, artists, dealers and curators follow them about; they are the aristocracy of business class and the private jet, burning up the globe for the luxury of a reclining seat or some inches of extra legroom. Frieze launches in the wake of the IPCC warnings of looming global catastrophe, about which the political class, over decades, have done nothing: it is no accident that they dwell in the pockets of corporations and the super-rich.

Some of the plumes of exhaust and smoke that humanity emits warm the shivering, feed the hungry, and make things that sustain body and mind. But what you see before you takes the Kantian command to be useless and makes of it the sign of conspicuous consumption: look at my money! The more art is useful (for investment, tax scams, money-laundering and entry to the elite) the more it parades its principled uselessness. The fairs are the result of steadily growing inequality that has fed the art market, while driving down the incomes of ever-larger portions of the population.

The richer you are, the general rule goes, the dirtier. The 0.1% is composed of crooks, swindlers, tax-evaders and the architects of banking scandals. Old money rests on the foundations built by slavery, drug-dealing and myriad exploitations of the environment and people. The new, very often, on corrupt privatisations, sweated labour, environmental despoliation, and collusion with the military-industrial-surveillance complex.

The richer you are, also the noisier. They have many ways of shouting loudly across all media about the necessity of their riches, the depth of their creativity, their many virtues (including, of course, their ‘patronage’ of the arts), and of insisting above all that everyone needs them: that without them—the elite, the exceptional—would lie the end of wealth, the end of innovation, the end of the individual and the end of art.

So, now you have bought your ticket, by all means look: you may find it easier to put out of your mind the noise, filth and blood on which this glitzy spectacle insouciantly rests. It may occur to you to test the claims of the super-rich against the products on show: is their culture really that fascinating? Is much of it tawdry? Perhaps you are bored? Future generations may look on our various spectacles of conspicuous consumption—the art fair, and the fashion, yacht or car show, with the same incomprehension and horror that we look on the mass slaughter of the buffalo, or the collecting of thousands of song birds, stuffed and displayed in cases, or the use of monkeys’ paws as ashtrays. So, yes, look, don’t buy. Look, think, act.