Something's Wrong…

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Art viewers at Documenta 12. Photo: JS

A minor art-world squall has blown up around Dave Hickey's announcement that he has 'retired' from writing criticism, in disgust. Art is now too popular ('I miss being an elitist and not having to talk to idiots', Hickey says in a recent interview); art is made for a bunch of extremely rich folk, for whom the critic acts as courtier or 'intellectual headwaiter'. In accompaniment, the *Observer* reports that a number of prominent curators have anonymously complained of having to defend over-rated work that happens to be worth a lot of money. One of them even described Tracey Emin's art as 'empty'.

Hickey, we may remember, became well-known as one of the more eloquent champions of 'beauty'—that is, of a cheery, market-friendly prettiness in art. Once a dealer, he assured his readers that private buyers following their tastes would produce a various and salutary beauty that could be held up against the dreary run of grim and grimy politicised art found in public spaces and on the biennial scene. It was a version of the Republican 'market-good, public-bad' reflex, applied to contemporary art. Hickey even staged a counter-biennial at Site Sante Fe in 2001, filling it with happy, bright and colourful sculptures and paintings, along with a lot of flowers.

So, coming from this source, the complaint that the market has produced something unpleasant is odd. It is very like Charles Saatchi's recent assault on dealers and collectors as vulgar and self-regarding. It is, in fact, the effect of failing to recognise your reflection in a mirror, and for an instant seeing yourself as others see you. All this has quite a bit of comedic value, but is there a more serious point here? If critics, collectors and dealers not only fail to recognise themselves but recoil in disgust at their reflection, we may ask: why.

First, there is the matter of art's coyness about its business side, which Olav Velthius has written about in the pages of *The Art Newspaper* and elsewhere. There continues to be considerable art-world resistance to the idea that a gallery is just a shop, the art fair just a mall, and the art work just another luxury product, to be set alongside jewellery, antiques, yachts and all the rest. In the short-term investments that made the boom years for contemporary art, huge numbers of new collectors were drawn in, and the art world lost its Euro-American axis. As it grew and globalised, its distinct minority culture was eroded. In its stead, celebrity, publicity, branding and the glitzy display of riches came to the fore—vulgarity, if you like.

Second, since the super-rich who buy the most expensive contemporary art have been most immune to the financial crisis, and since they also use art as a hedge against the movement of other investments, the top levels of the market have appeared relatively unaffected. The vulgar business of flaunting consumption goes on, while around it everything has changed. It is not just that something seems wrong with the art world. All now appears in a strange new light: bankers are reviled; the political elite is revealed as corrupt, impotent and undemocratic; and capitalism itself is stripped of its ideological cloak, standing naked as the engine of rampant debt, inequality and environmental devastation. In that new frame, the picture of the elite continuing to spend their fortunes on vacuous fine-art geegaws is bound to look less pleasing than it once did.

So Hickey (and Saatchi) may not like the world that they helped bring into being, but its direction and impetus lies entirely within the logic of what they represented and defended. Hickey points to the disappearance of the middle-class, who leave behind the super-rich and a courtier class, including those unfortunate enough to write about art. The evaporation of the Euro-American middle class, as its professions are automated or out-sourced and its wages driven down, is one of the great developments of our neoliberal age, and it has been greatly accelerated through the long financial crisis. It attacks not just art but the roots of liberal democracy, as the class which defended the system is disenfranchised by it.

Yet, if art works are vulgar and empty, why should people be any more upset by that than by, say, garish packaging on supermarket shelves? Within the system, the arts were supposed to be

the repository of free self-expression, set apart from bureaucratized working lives and the standardized fare of mass culture. The durability of this view remains has less to do with the market than the state, and particularly with those reverence-producing machines known as museums. With the increasing visibility of art's material base (of its being put to use by states, the super-rich and big business), art's ideally free character fades, along with its hold on the imagination. Think, for example of the strange clash of cultures in the recent Damien Hirst blockbuster at Tate Modern: the branded artist set against the branded museum. The museum's staid display techniques sought to impart gravity to what was shown, while Hirst's glitzy, attention-seeking and self-consciously branded work undermined it. It was very popular, and the line between museum and shop was hard to discern.

The museum is also responsible for the persistent feeling that works of art have something deep to say reflect their wider society. If this is so, what does hedge-fund art say about ours? The belief in that link, perhaps, is why we recoil from art's reflection: we see ourselves, not in a momentary misrecognition this time, but as a cogent, unified image produced by a systematic and consistent causality—money. Do we take a knife to the portrait of our own corruption, as Dorian Grey did? And if we do, what survives?

The super-rich dominate the mainstream image of the art market, just as they do much to control the political agenda. Yet huge and diverse realms lay beyond the culture and the politics of this tiny elite. The years of the art boom were also those of social media, as millions started to make and show their photographs, videos, writings and art online. Many of them found out that it is not so hard to make things that look like contemporary art. Another reflection—complex, contradictory, vulgar and popular, and in some respects less desolating—lies there.