Populist Art and the Condition of Criticism

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> … here I must desire of all those critics to mind their own business, and not to intermeddle with affairs or works which no ways concern them; for until they produce the authority by which they are constituted judges, I shall not plead to their jurisdiction. (Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, 1749)

The contemporary art world has become deeply split between a rapidly growing market for goods that cater to the super-rich, and other modes—documentary, participatory, activist—that either take a semi-detached stance to the moneyed ferment or stand firmly against it. Far from being a peaceful divergence in which the different realms inhabit their own discrete environments without disturbing each other (as new media art did with the mainstream art world for so long, before the disruption of 'post-Internet' art) the ongoing crisis that emerged from the global financial crash in 2008 has fostered an acute and hostile schizophrenia. Periodical writing about contemporary art from Diderot onwards has always been formed by the particular character of the market, by art institutions and by its readership. How has the present situation affected art writing and 'art criticism'?

One place to start looking is in a stark opposition between judgements that are often made about art criticism:

> --that it's dead, utterly complicit with the market, or powerless in the face of it
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> --that it (or at least something related, with the newish name of 'art writing') is renewed, radical, diverse and thriving

The first complaint is an old one (very old, in fact, given the corruptions of the press which have regularly produced accusations of bribery and false sensationalism) but it gained particular currency in the US with the waning of Abstract Expressionism and with it of the plausibility of the Hegelian terminus for an autonomous art as theorised by Clement Greenberg. This was a criticism that had the ambition not merely to define a field of art but to direct it. The ideal died

with the rise of Pop and other tendencies that stood as direct refutations of the supposed sweep of history to its final synthesis. Worse was to come. The rise of Neo-Expressionism through the 1980s seemed to mark a death knell for the power of criticism as a whole: Julian Schnabel was the archetypal case here, since no significant critic seemed to support his painting—and many reviled it—but that did nothing to stop it from becoming hugely successful commercially.[1] So criticism, the story went, lost its position of previous dominance, and it did so in a welter of money and vulgarity, as Greenberg's 'umbilical cord of gold' became something else entirely—a solid gold kidult, perhaps.[2]

Figure 1: Jeff Koons poses next to his artwork *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988) in the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen, Switzerland, 2012.

The current turn takes this to greater extremes: the speculative contemporary art boom of the early to mid 2000s saw the rise of a great deal of what I have called 'populist art', and the post-Crash economic era did not much alter it, at least at the highest end.[3] This art is of a simple character, generally figurative and expressive—or faux-expressive; it has an enthusiastic engagement with commercial mass culture; and it is often delivered through branded artistic persona, who may be compared to populist leaders. Damien Hirst, to take one prominent

[1] For example, Robert Hughes claimed that 'Schnabel's work is to painting what [Sylvester] Stallone's is to acting'. Hughes, 'The Artist as Entrepreneur', *New Republic*, 14 December 1987; a more nuanced but still critical view can be found in Roberta Smith, 'Schnabel and Stella: Art, Myth and Ego', *New York Times*, 6 December 1987; for a general account, see Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2009, pp. 96-9.

[2] Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' (1939), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 1, Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986, p. 11.

[3] I have explored the notion of populist art more fully in 'Elite Art in an Age of Populism', in Alexander Dumbadze/ Suzanne Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford 2013, pp. 39-49.

example, would make a pretty good demagogue, and certainly his crudely expressed sentiments about making art for 'the people' fit closely with populist rhetoric and the tactic of displaying what might normally regarded as faults to court them.[4]

In the US, most of the best-selling artists make highly accessible work; and some (in a backwash from the current popularity of street art) are associated with graffiti's first (brief and ill-fated) flush of success in the galleries—for example, Michel Basquiat and George Condo. The most successful contemporary artists in 2015-16 by turnover at auction are (in order): Michel Basquiat, Christopher Wool, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Peter Doig, Yoshimoto Nara, Rudolf Stingel and Keith Haring (with Basquiat and Koons leading the prices for single works over a number of years).[5] All are male, most are white males of a certain age and swagger, and most are branded. The dominance of street-art or street-art derived work is striking, as is the fact that none of these works are likely to leave you creasing your brow for very long. This snapshot of the heights of the market shows an aspect of the art world that is very far from its usual view of itself as liberal, non-conformist, open to women and people of colour, complex and deconstructive.

This development is also fuelled by Chinese artists. The Chinese art market—at least as measured by auction sales—has undergone extraordinary growth in recent years. It share of the global total has gone from single figures in 2007 to rival the US in auction sales turnover for contemporary art.[6] This is largely due to figure painters with branded styles and deeply conservative subject matter, such as Chen Yifei, Zeng Fanzhi, Yue Minjun and Zhang Xiogang.

The broad popularity of this market-friendly art is no illusion: think of Hirst's Tate Modern show in 2012, the most successful solo show ever held at the world's most popular contemporary art museum.[7] Remember the massive growth of the contemporary art world in economic terms—a near 10% p.a. since 2000, so that it has grown about 14 times bigger in the years to 2016.[8] And with it, a concomitant rise in the number of contemporary art museums, biennials and art fairs, and of their visitors, along with a massive expansion of PR to support this hypertrophic industry. The number of contemporary art museums (among others), essential tools in gentrification and regional development, continues to grow rapidly across the globe, making the museum and art experience a more common part of everyday life. 700 new museums (of all categories) are opening around the world every year, and more museums were built between 2000 and 2014 than during the previous 200 years.[9]

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[4] On these populist tactics, see Francisco Panizza, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, Verso, London 2005, pp. 26-8.

[5] https://www.artprice.com/artprice-reports/the-contemporary-art-market-report-2016/market-structure As is often pointed out in the art market literature, auction sales are usually the best we can do because most gallery deals are secret. See, however, Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005.

[6] All auction sale figures need to be taken with a large dose of scepticism, since they are highly manipulated by interested parties, not least the auction houses themselves. The Chinese figures need additional caution since buy-in levels are high, and the published price is rarely paid in full. See Georgina Adam, *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the 21st Century*, Lund Humphries, London 2014, pp. 138-40.

[7] The exhibition had 463,000 paying viewers. See Matilda Battersby, 'Tate Modern's Damien Hirst Retrospective Attracts Record-Breaking Visitor Numbers', *The Independent*, 17 September 2012.

[8] Thierry Erhmann, 'Editorial', The Contemporary Art Market Report 2016: https://www.artprice.com/artprice-reports/the-contemporary-art-market-report-2016/contemporary-art-market-2016

[9] Thierry Erhmann, 'Editorial', The Contemporary Art Market Report 2016: https://www.artprice.com/artprice-

Three large developments underpin the rise of populist market art. First, the matching cosmopolitanism of the super-rich and the art world itself, which demotes national traditions and their accompanying art-historical knowledge in favour of the new. This was partly caused by the changing profile of collecting itself, as new buyers swept into the apparently profitable investment opportunity held out by contemporary art; many knew little about art history and bought on the power of famous names, readily identifiable trends and fashionable national tendencies ('Brazilian art is hot right now', etc.)—the latter were seen as marketing devices, in which a mediatised and branded national identity is performed.

Second, the growth of the super-rich (in both numbers and wealth) which closely matches the rise of the art market. They are often money-rich but time-poor, and so want quick, easy, showy, branded art. The art world, which has outgrown its once small and enclosed Euro-American domain, is less insulated than it was from the wider culture, having become a global social club for the mega-rich (Andrea Fraser's 0.1%)—among whom are numbered, of course, the entrepreneurs of the great global media conglomerates. Increases in their wealth are mechanically tied to an increase in art prices.[10] Their herd-like attachments are often strongly informed by what is 'popular'.

Figure 2: Dakis Joannous' yacht, *Guilty*, designed by Jeff Koons and Ivana Porfiri, 2013.

Third, the growth of asset prices in the long recession since 2008, as immense funds slosh around and cannot be productively invested, so they are sunk in luxury goods. The acquisition of very expensive art is of a piece with buying similarly costly houses and estates, yachts, antiques,

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reports/the-contemporary-art-market-report-2016/contemporary-art-market-2016

[10] Andrea Fraser, 'L'1%, C'est Moi', *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 83, September 2011, pp. 114-27; republished as '1% Art' in *Adbusters*, https://www.adbusters.org/article/1-art/

fine wines, or diamonds. Sometimes in, as with Dakis Joannous' cynically named artist-designed yacht, *Guilty*, the association is brought to the point of identity.

In my book *Art Incorporated*, I looked at growing threats to art's autonomy, to the protected realm that makes it distinct from the general run of commercial culture, and saw them mostly in state and business interference.[11] Less so, in the power of the billionaire collector-dealer and private museum owner, I have to admit, but in the years since then their power has become obvious and over-weening. Once could imagine that the exercise of this power could be a way in which the autonomy of arts is protected, as with the patrons of many past eras, who carved out tastes and patronised artistic practices that were very far from being popular. We are faced instead with the strange puzzle that the global elite (so separate from everyone else in their life experiences) seems to share popular tastes.

It is unsurprising that this art does little to foster critical discourse—quite the opposite. That is partly a function of the kind of people it attracts: Charles Saatchi, of all people, mounted a recent assault on dealers and collectors as vulgar and self-regarding.[12] And influential US critic, Dave Hickey, noisily announced his retirement from writing criticism, in disgust. Art is now too popular, being made for a bunch of extremely rich folk, for whom the critic acts as courtier or 'intellectual headwaiter'.[13] Or Ivor Braka, a London dealer since 1978: "The art market has become an excuse for banking in public. People are displaying wealth in the most ostentatious way possible. It's luxury goods shopping gone wild."[14]

As Chris Dercon (once director of Tate Modern) claimed in a talk about soft power, the very expense of the art flattens the range of available things that can be said about it. It can't be criticised because it's too valuable![15] The asset price of an art work, after all, is merely a bet, it relies on a belief system. Attempt to puncture it at your peril.

In 2014, a *Brooklyn Rail* special issue carried many features about art criticism across Europe: despite very diverse circumstances, and accounts from nations with long-established art worlds and those adjusting to the end of dictatorships (from Spain to Romania), similar patterns emerge: of a rapidly growing art world, with a mix of public and private institutions, engaging much larger audiences; and simultaneously of an embattled or even failing art criticism, withering in the demand for servile publicity.[16] To take one striking example from the survey, Denmark: the rise of many respected and widely seen artists with a global reputation over the last 20 years—including Tal R, Olafur Eliassion, Superflex, Elmgreen and Dragset—had been accompanied by a near-absence of critical writing. There remained (in 2014) only one full-time newspaper critic in

[11] *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004.
[12] David Barrett, 'Saatchi Attacks "Vulgar" Contemporary Art World', *The Telegraph*, 3 December 2011.
[13] Edward Helmore/ Paul Gallagher, 'Doyen of American critics turns his back on the 'nasty, stupid' world of modern art', *The Observer*, 28 October 2012.
[14] Quoted in Scott Reyburn, 'Can an Economist's Theory Apply to Art?', *New York Times*, 20 April 2014.
[15] Panel discussion on 'Museums and Soft Power', Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 24 June 2015; the discussion is available here: https://courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/what-on/exhibitions-displays/ma-curating-archive/the-second-hand-reworked-art-over-time/museums-and-soft-power
[16] *The Brooklyn Rail*, 16 May 2014; the collection was assembled under the auspices of AICA (the International Association of Art Critics). https://brooklynrail.org/special/ART_CRIT_EUROPE/

the entire country.[17]

This set of accounts reflects much of what James Elkins had to say about art criticism in his 2008 collection and analysis: a lot of it being written; it was mostly tied to publicity in vehicles like the exhibition catalogue and the magazine review (often published in exchange for advertising); it was not much read, and it was rarely the subject of wider comment outside the art world.[18] Art criticism is hardly alone in this. Some of the pressures bearing down on art criticism apply to the decline of print journalism as a whole: time and resource constraints mean that press releases get passed little altered to publication. This decline in the quality of journalism has been due to profit gouging, and has been exacerbated by the failing of the print model as its advertising wanes, especially since the financial crisis and the rise of social media.[19] Combined with the power of the PR machines to freeze out inconvenient voices, film, literary and music criticism have also become blander and more market-led.[20]

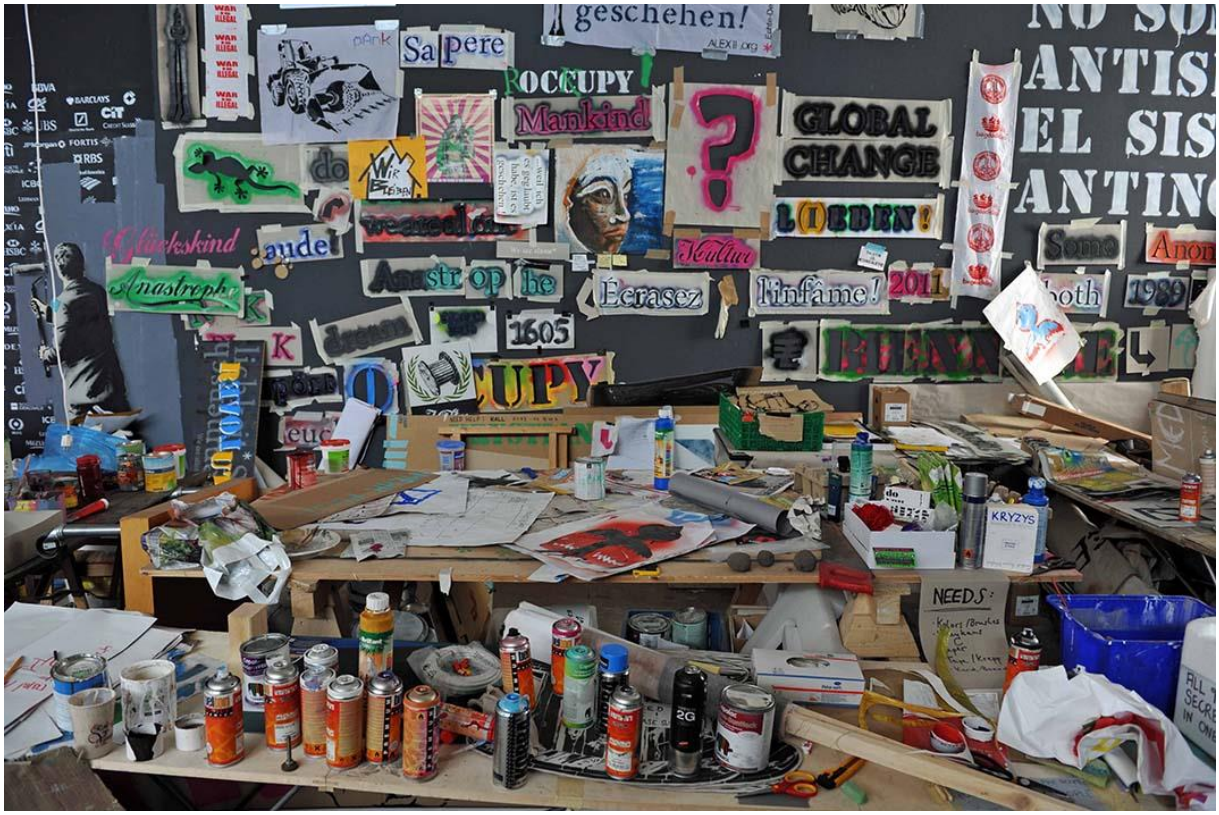

Figure 3: Occupy Berlin, 2012. Photo: JS.

In tension with populist art, the biennial has become geared towards an art of quite a different character: it is explicitly politicised and theoretically informed, an art of crisis with pedagogic and

[17] Lisbeth Bonde, 'On the Danish Contemporary Art Scene and Art Criticism', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 16 May 2014: https://brooklynrail.org/special/ART_CRIT_EUROPE/reports-and-interviews-from/on-the-danish-contemporary-art-scene-and-art-criticism

[18] James Elkins, ed., *The State of Art Criticism*, Routledge, London 2008, pp. 71-3. Elkins also notes the contrast between the quantity of art criticism and its crisis, which leads to radically differing accounts of its general health.

[19] For an account of the British newspaper press, see Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News*, Chatto & Windus, London 2008.

[20] Such complaints are quite old, and are a feature of the neoliberal turn: for a collection that examines art, literary, music and film criticism, see Maurice Berger, ed., *The Crisis of Criticism*, The New Press, New York 1998. I made my own diagnosis too: 'The Decline and Fall of Art Criticism', *Magazyn Sztuki* (Gdansk), no. 18, 1998, pp. 85-92.

radical content. In form, it generally favours the documentary with video, film and photography, or political collage and installation, or performance, much of it not very marketable. Its content stages a series of negations, since it is anti-nationalist, anti-religious, anti-neoliberal, anti-sexist and anti-racist, it offers at least implicitly a series of positive ideals, particularly (and paradoxically) of a globalised egalitarianism. Especially since the start of the financial crisis and the rise of new social movements, it has been increasingly explicit in its political engagement. The Berlin Biennial of 2012, curated by Artur Zmijewski and Joanna Warsza, engaged with Occupy; the 2015 Venice Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor was a prominent example of an explicitly engaged event, as was the 2017 Documenta.[21]

What kind of criticism does this alternative world foster? Under the impact of the wars on 'terror' followed by the financial crisis and its still unfolding recession, this is surely richer than for many years. There are first the artist-theorists, some of them veterans, borne up into new relevance and popularity after decades in the neoliberal desert (like Jeremy Corbyn): Martha Rosler, the late Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, and those of younger generations—Coco Fusco, Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl and even Ai Weiwei—in many cases, their critical writing some of the sharpest and most perceptive around. Then there are the philosophers and other theorists who have been called upon to engage with the art world, and do so extensively: Judith Butler, Chantal Mouffe, Donna Haraway, Giorgio Agamben, Bruno Latour, Alain Badiou, Boris Groys, Jacques Ranciere, Slavoj Zizek, Peter Osborne, Saskia Sassen, Paolo Virno…one could go on. And new generations of critic-theorists, who have a considerable intellectual hinterland, and are not the slaves of the (reduced and spectral) newspapers: people such as Claire Bishop, Isabel Graw, Ariella Azoulay, Eyal Weizman, McKenzie Wark, Yates McKee, Sianne Ngai, Nina Power, among many others.

In all this, there is much new thinking on new economic models and automation, labour, on the place of cultural work in society as a whole, feminism and gender identity, ecology and decolonising thought. This has been marked by a marked resurgence of Marxist cultural thinking, along with its thought generally—in *HM*, *New Left Review*, *Jacobin*, *N+1*, etc.—and not just in the arguably cuddlier Autonomist strand but in re-evaluations of the thoughts of Lenin and Mao. Marxism was very evident at Venice in 2015, both theoretically and in artistic terms: Alexander Kluge and Isaac Julien addressed Marx directly through their work. *Capital* was read each day in the central auditorium of the Italian Pavilion. And Marx was listed as an artist in the catalogue![22]

Up to now, for the purposes of clarity, we have painted the division between populist and politicised art as a stark contrast, but there are areas in which they are far from separate and feed off each other: the biennial business and the art fair are wings of the same dove (as Joseph Backstein, the director of the Moscow Biennial incautiously commented on its founding in 2003). A study of the 2012 Basel art fair shows that there was considerable overlap with exhibits at the Documenta the same year, at least among the lesser-ranked galleries at the heavily

[21] For an account of this engaged political art, focused on the US, see Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, Verso, London 2016. For the UK, see Paula Serafini, *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism*, Routledge, Abingdon 2018.
[22] La Biennale di Venezia, *56th International Art Exhibition: All the World's Futures*, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, Venice 2015, pp. 118-19.

hierarchical fair.[23]

Among the common elements are the occasion and the event: some aspects of, say, Frieze also apply to Venice: the flocks of collectors arriving in private jets, the parties, and the intricate circles of ranked privilege and admission. The money of the one world bears up some of the activities of the other; and that the biennial is often mounted for economic reasons of regional development, tourism, to foster the local commercial art world, and is of course a way to raise reputations and prices.

The increasing lightness, speed and accessibility of art does not merely characterise populist art but is a pressure on all art production.[24] The increased speed of cultural cycles, a constitutional feature of post-industrial capitalism affects art as much as every other realm, pushing it towards easy consumption and Instagrammable status: think of the development of video art from being (generally) an abstruse, demanding and difficult medium which few had patience for to become (often) an entertaining, high-production value, professionally acted spectacle.

Figure 4: Anne Imhoff, *Faust*, German Pavilion, Venice 2017. Photo: Francesco Galli.

Both types of art, too, are increasingly creatures of social media feedback, as was very clear at the 2017 Venice with the hit of the biennale, Anne Imhof's performance work *Faust*—in a work that allied popular and critical acclaim, mass media attention and a vast amount social media sharing which was conceived as an integral part of the performance.

[23] Franz Schultheis/ Erwin Single/ Stephan Egger/ Thomas Mazzurana, *When Art Meets Money: Encounters at Art Basel*, Walther König, n.d., pp. 52-3.
[24] The key theorist of this cultural acceleration is of course David Harvey: see *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1990, ch. 17.

At the extreme of the association of these two worlds, there is a perverse paradox: collectors who buy works that depict political catastrophe. This is particularly so of large-scale photography, which comes close to being used and seen as the new history painting, in Courbet mode but without his politics. Many conservative aesthetes moaned that the 2015 Venice was too gloomy, metaphorically and actually dark, and too overtly political, but there are scenes of political and ecological catastrophe that *sell*.[25] Think of Sebastião Salgado, Richard Mosse or Edward Burtynsky:

Why do photographs showing disaster hang in the rooms of the art-buying elite? A portion of the rich choose to live with big prints, matching the scale of postwar painting, which bear dire images of war, poverty and environmental destruction. They are usually technically accomplished, carefully composed and finely printed. What species of social distinction is gained by owning and displaying such objects, and what pleasure is found in looking at them?

Figure 5: Edward Burtynsky, *Oil Bunkering #1*, Niger Delta, Nigeria 2016.

In Burtynsky's work, the contradictions of this genre of art photography are forced into piercing proximity. In his well-known major project about oil, over a decade in the making, that engine of industry and consumerism is represented in large, striking images which indicate the sheer vastness and filth of the enterprise from extraction to exhaust pipe. Most people experience the oil industry from the consumer end: the endless growl, sigh and drone of aerial and ground

[25] For one example of such complaints, see Laura Cumming, '56th Venice Biennale Review – More of a Glum Trudge than an Exhilarating Adventure', *The Observer*, 10 May 2015.

traffic, the pollution of our every breath, the threat of speeding vehicles that drives social life from the streets, and the stench of the petrol station. What is hidden from those who do not live in oil-producing areas is the Stygian filth of the extraction process, and the vast destruction of land and life that it causes. The scale of the prints, then, has a point that goes beyond art-world convention, as the extent of oil's ruination of land, sea and air finds metaphorical expression in the way the viewer's body is dwarfed by the size of the works.

So the fundamental move here is something close to political propaganda: the use of the highest technical capacity of photography, a central medium of consumer 'publicity', to render dark images of the consequences of consumerism. The viewers' implication in the system of destruction, known to everyone but pushed to the back of the mind, is forced upon us: that a petrol-driven trip to the shops to buy bits of plastic causes the tar-sand mining of Canadian wilderness.

Even so, the gallery viewer may take pause, while contemplating these sublime spectacles of environmental degradation, to reflect on the objects in which they inhere. The photographic image is now, after all (and especially for Burtynsky since he moved to using digital cameras for his aerial work in the 'Water' series), a virtually weightless data file—the values read from an array of photons processed to make an ordered sequence of electrons. The prints, though, are large, heavy and rare (they are made in small editions); they are luxury items to be guarded and carefully presented by curators for the public, and conserved by the few able to own them privately. They are flown from venue to venue, art fair to art fair, for the consumption and contemplation of the small elite that buys such art and the larger one that views it.

Figure 6: Richard Mosse, *Suspicious Minds*, 2012.

This is equally true of Mosse. His extraordinarily large and technically polished prints, made using an old infrared surveillance film, are used to depict aspects of the Congo's long, extensive and dire civil war, in a struggle over land, labour and above all minerals: particularly diamonds and coltan, the blood-soaked product contained in every mobile phone.

In both, there is sublime spectacle. While in the modernist era, the vastness of industry was often taken as a magnification of human powers that would lead to mass emancipation, now it is more likely to be read as an apocalyptic pronouncement on the limited capacity of the environment to sustain global consumerism. The sublime still operates in Burtynsky's pictures because the viewer is protected from the threat, insulated from the stench of industry and industrialised agriculture, from the poisons that cling to skin and work their way into the bronchial tree; and protected, also, from too harsh an experience of chaotic filth by compositional order within the frame. Yet the real dangers of flood, drought, hurricane, heat wave and earthquake remain, and beyond even those perils, the prospect of an environmental collapse devastating enough to bring down the social order.[26] From that disaster—and that of state collapse as seen in Mosse—not even the global elite would be safe. So the sublime is there, but it is no longer quite intact as the enjoyment of a horror held at a safe distance, but is infected by the growing threat of mass extermination.[27]

Burtynsky has often said that his pictures enact the contradiction of environmental conscience and consumerism.[28] Consumers seem to be caught firmly in the bonds of guilt and desire, and the allure of a Burtynsky print brings into view the tangled net of those emotions, as viewers admire and consume the image of their own destruction. Burtynsky's pictures may also enact the powerlessness of conscience in this capitalist crisis to which the only effective response is concerted state and international action.

How do they call to the viewer? To enjoy, in a typical art-world convention, the frisson of inescapable contradiction? The concerns of the work seem too serious, too deadly, for this. To admire the linked impact of their extraordinary craft and their propaganda value? As an invitation to greater awareness and morality? To share them digitally so as to magnify their effect? To campaign for green issues and the protection of the wild? Or do they call to the viewer as commodities? Their technical accomplishment and compositional order may induce the collector to make a purchase. There may be many motives for buying: perhaps the work will be widely shown, shared or even given away to a public institution. Yet if the intention is to keep the print as a private treasure, or to take it as a pure investment—to do that, in our present circumstances, would be an act of strange perversity.

You may wonder why I have undertaken this long digression on Burtynsky: well, I was commissioned to write an essay for a catalogue for the artist, wrote something along these lines, and (it may not surprise you) the gallery declined to publish. There are many acts of art-world

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[26] There is a large literature on the connection between the collapse of complex societies and environmental degradation. See, for example, Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Viking, New York 2004. There is some evidence that global warming may lead to increased tectonic activity. See 'IPCC Studies Link Between Warming and Earthquake Activity', *New Scientist*, 5 October 2011.

[27] The model of the sublime used here is Burke's; see Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757], Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990.

[28] See, for instance, Jonathan Blaustein, 'Edward Burtynsky Interview', *APhotoEditor*, 25 July 2012.

censorship which generally go unremarked and unpublicised. I've experienced a few others myself. And many more of self-censorship, as writers hold back from critique out of self-interest and fear. The decline of critique is partly, then, a matter of time, asset values and PR but also of active repression.

Figure 7: Sebastião Salgado, Kuwait, 1991.

And again, such images of disaster are not just popular with collectors but have a mass audience. Sometimes they bring out an interpretive position that you would more often associate with populist art. I participated in a panel following a showing of Wim Wenders' film on Sebastião Salgado, *Salt of the Earth* (2014): while we all offered critique of the photographer's work and the film from a fundamentally supportive viewpoint, the audience responded badly, in a mode worthy of Bruno Latour's writing on the exhaustion of criticism: Salgado does his own thing, he's passionately committed to it, and it's mean to criticise![29]

So, in this strange compact of commercialised disaster pictures, is there a place for critique? And is there a critical equivalent to the cross-over between populist and biennial art? The first thing to say is that the contemporary art world has become much more like any other business than it used to be—remember its colossal expansion in the last fifteen years, and its mass of new collectors, who often buy for instrumental purposes. Sylvère Lotringer, in a long discussion with Paul Virilio complains of there being simply *too much* art, and consequently that:

> Art has become a sort of black hole. The pull, the glamour, the giddiness of it all is too strong for anyone to resist. And at the same time, it's just crude business deals and shady

[29] Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, no. 30, Winter 2004, pp. 225-48.

calculation. It's become no different than anything else.[30]

The demands to produce fast and often, which fall on journalists, critics and social media producers, press down on artists too. The cycle of art fairs urges on the continual making of 'fresh' work. The vast increase in quantity (of museums, art fairs, biennials, art works, along with prices) bears on quality. Here we can draw upon Fredric Jameson's demand that, grasped dialectically, a negative can produce a positive.[31] It may be that the over-population of arty products and places to show them may act to demystify them. So the first mask to slip is that of *quantity*: the sheer size of the contemporary art world which undermines the idea of it as a special and autonomous realm, rather than merely being another arm of the luxury goods sector.

Figure 8: Signage in central Seoul, 2009. Photo: JS.

[30] Sylvère Lotringer/ Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, trans. Michael Taormina, Semiotext(e), New York 2005, pp. 86, 65.
[31] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, London 2009, pp. 427f.

We know, too, that value and criticism can become linked. A signal example was the work of Richard Prince: Molly Concannon has shown how hedge fund investors engaged in a concerted campaign to drive up his prices, with great success: his prices at auction had for decades bumped along at the few-thousand dollar level but he was to become one of the most expensive artists on the planet.[32] But how does an investor know that an artist is undervalued? In Prince's case it was because of the stark mismatch between auction prices and reputation, including serious writing by reputable critics and art historians. In the opposite operation, dealers for John Currin had to buy in heavyweight 'critical' writers to try to correct an embarrassing imbalance between gilded market price and a paucity of sufficiently weighty literature.[33]

So there is indeed an equivalent criticism of the meeting point in which 'critical' thought acquires market value, especially in the monographic catalogue essay for living artists, for which quite large fees are paid, and where the veneer of critique meets public relations. It would be invidious to name names here, but we all know of the fundamentally propagandistic essay, in which a parade of theoretical greats is found in some loose or unspecified way to validate a set of artistic commodities. As a character of Evelyn Waugh's declares tartly on hearing of a favourable review: 'Anyone can buy a don.'[34]

Such essays must conform to definite rules: they must stage criticism as social distinction, which makes for a cramped and difficult style. Celebrated names and concepts should be invoked, and paradoxes spun—on occasion, using some of those philosophers I named earlier—to suggest the ineffable depths of the works on sale. If difficulty and paradox are markers of distinction, we would expect to find them deployed for their own sake—and we do, frequently in art's promotional literature but also in art's 'theoretical' literature. This is very much a peacock operation: the vaunting of fitness through a display so extravagant and costly that it becomes a handicap—for writer and reader alike, and for the development of clear, radical understanding.[35]

Yet this operation is also in tension with the demands of industry, and its need for ever greater speed and extent of production—of the jobbing academic who knocks out a dozen 'theoretical' catalogue essays a year, each for a fat fee: the thinning and spreading in populism applies to criticism too. While the acquisition of a suitable theoretical apparatus is costly, both mentally and economically, those in possession of an efficient wood-chipper of, say, the Hegelian-Lacanian or Deleuzian-Agambanesque brand, can feed it with a vast variety of material to produce rapidly the same serviceable mulch. If criticism is a product just as much as the work of art, then some of the same questions about quality and quantity can be asked of it, as quality yields to quantity, and with it the very social distinction it is supposed to endow.

The old model of the intellectual—of slow and sustained thought over decades, organically connected with a defined and limited cultural tradition—is placed under the imminent threat of

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[32] Molly Concannon, *Collecting Richard Prince: Strategies of a New Type of Investor in the Contemporary Market*, MA Dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, London 2005.
[33] Graw, *High Price*, pp. 50-1.
[34] Evelyn Waugh, 'Work Suspended' (1941), in *Work Suspended and Other Stories Written Before the Second World War*, Chapman & Hall, London 1948, p. 146.
[35] On peacocks and other costly displays, see Amotz and Avishag Zahavi, *The Handicap Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997.

execution. Think here of Adorno's claim that speedy thought is that done with a pencil in hand.[36] We may contrast Martha Rosler and her tortured Facebook post from a few years ago: 'I should be writing. I want to be writing. I mean to be writing. Therefore, I am on here on FB. Instead. {kill me now}' Yet, once again, the negative may yield a positive.

On principle, Rosler's artistic work has regularly been fast and cheap, in a feminist and leftist rejection of traditional quality. She makes works that do not seek to over-awe the viewer with their technical prowess but rather allow them to think, 'I could do this too'. Her essay writing, in contrast, has been meticulously researched, rigorous and polished.[37] But now she is frequently on Facebook: and who is to say that her insistent posting—quick, short, timely, provocative—to thousands of followers does not have a greater effect than her books of essays?

At the simultaneous dawning of the modern novel and the bourgeois public, Henry Fielding asked critics to supply their credentials. The demand has often been repeated since, and is heard very frequently now, as all expertise is held up to sceptical examination in the light of numerous failures—most notably, the financial crisis itself. In this climate, the advantage falls to those who self-consciously perform out of a persona (as artists, especially, are wont to do), offering provocations, paradoxes and striking phrases that have no pretence to objectivity.

What is more, with the erosion of the distinction between those who make and those who merely consume social media, an integral knowledge of complex cultural matters emerges. This is seen very clearly in the greater understanding of the many ways in which photography can be manipulated. This used to be the stuff of difficult postmodern theory, but many people hardly need this education anymore, since it is informally 'taught' by Instagram and Photoshop. In this erosion, of course, the figure of the artist and critic alike become hybridised and begin to dissolve: another striking aspect of the *Brooklyn Rail* issue was the extent to which critic was just one job among many: artist, teacher, curator, administrator and consultant.

It used to be a common complaint on the left: 'Everything is commodified! Even our dissent!' More often heard now is the point that it works both ways: commodification alters and pollutes dissent, but dissent also alters and pollutes the commodity, using its power to spread slogans, jokes, campaigns and actions that corporations and states would rather not be heard—especially now that the capitalist system is in such evident and prolonged crisis and drift. Hito Steyerl exploits this effect in her art works, with their parodic take on the corporate propaganda video to produce an entertaining, funny, glossy, high-production-value Brechtianism. And likewise in her writing, which allies scholarly references with accessible high-octane provocations.[38] She is hardly in this—Slavoj Žižek and Boris Groys come to mind as successful performative theorists.

If we think of the life of a social media star, we can see in extreme form the mental pollution produced by the pursuit of advertising profit: the endlessly positive, hyperactive cultivation of the brand, as each intervention is tested against the (equally unknowable) public and the algorithm. A few of the slaves to the beat of that galley drum are richly rewarded but the mental

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[36] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracaeur', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, vol. II, Columbia University Press, New York 1992, p. 61.
[37] See, for example, Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2004.
[38] Her latest collection is Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, Verso, London 2017.

costs are high, as existence is bent entirely to maintaining the façade.[39]

The art writer rarely labours under such dire conditions, if only because the fees paid are usually so low that no one can make a living at it, even while the trajectory is evident and the dangers obvious. Even so, the very lack of remuneration offers freedoms to oppose the invidious and absurd system that has evolved. One is slow work. I should admit: I have just spent ten years writing a book, which has a section on speed and slowness, and the resources of the poor in slow acts of erosion to defeat the rich and the well-equipped.[40] In exploiting the powers of rapid, cheap action, we should not forget the old mole that slowly burrows and undermines. So it may be that we lay the old over the new, explore relations between them, and pursue both. Another is collective work, to oppose the bourgeois individualism woven so deeply into capitalist culture, and the art world, and which has reached a mocking farce in the branded persona. Andrea Fraser says that the role of art as toys for the super-rich cannot be dissociated from its content, and that a radical secession may be one response.[41] The powers arrayed against such a move are powerful: perhaps the normcore display of the 'originals' of very costly art works is enough to satisfy the culture. Perhaps the proxy display of money itself is sufficient to provoke fascination and distinction.[42] Yet, despite the tensions, fissures and contradictions, the much greater art public, based in an educated and increasingly precarious global middle class, have demanded and produced more radical artistic forms, along with a critical writing to bolster it: as crisis grows so will critique.

[39] For one account, see Chris Stokel-Walker, 'Why YouTubers are Feeling the Burn', *The Observer*, 12 August 2018.
[40] *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, Verso, London 2019.
[41] Andrea Fraser, 'L'1%, C'est Moi'.
[42] This is the view of Wolfgang Ulrich, 'Icons of Capitalism: How Prices Make Art', in Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzina, *Arte, Prezzo e Valore: Arte Contemporanea e Mercato*, Silvana Editoriale, Florence 2008, pp. 41-56.