

Print Article



Installation view of "Dan Colen: Poetry" at Gagosian Gallery
Photo by Rob McKeever



Installation view of "Marc Newson: Transport" at Gagosian Gallery
Photo by Rob McKeever



Rob Pruitt, "Cardboard Monsters," at Maccarone, September 2010



Installation view of "50 Years at Pace: Minimalist, Conceptual, and Post-Modern Art" at Pace Gallery

ART IN THE TIME OF AUSTERITY

by Ben Davis

These are dark times -- but walking around Chelsea for the new art season, I couldn't get a hint of it. Maybe the scene feels a little less exuberant than in 2007. But as far as I can tell, no new mood has gripped the visual arts to match the new mood gripping the country, the sense that we are living through an era of dramatic unemployment, economic stagnation, and some very ugly scenes of political reaction.

It's not just the plush nihilism of [Dan Colen](#) at Gagosian, who Jerry Saltz recently [tagged](#) for making "an event straight out of 2007." Remember "design art," that icon of the go-go '00s? Well, over at Gagosian's other space, you've got [Marc Newson](#) designing surfboards and rocket ships. You want glib, arty insider-ness? The big show of the moment at [Gavin Brown's Enterprise](#) and [Maccarone](#) is "Pattern and Desecration," a celebration of the artist as "unbridled human, indifferent to convention and with every avenue open to him," by [Rob Pruitt](#). You want safe? [Pace](#) has an expansive, luxurious multi-gallery show celebrating its own storied history.

I'm not saying that any of this is bad art, necessarily; what I am saying is that it doesn't really have anything like the painful sting of now. And, behind this fact, there lurks a Tale of Two Art Worlds.

On the one hand, it is the Best of Times. This year has seen not one but two artworks sell for more than \$100 million at auction, an almost unheard of feat: \$104.3 million for [Alberto Giacometti's](#) *L'Homme qui marche I*; \$106-million for [Picasso's](#) *Nude, Green Leaves and Bust*. To put such numbers in perspective, the price of the Picasso *Nude* alone is a wee bit less than the *entire annual budget* for New York City's Cultural Institutions Group, which gets \$110 million to fund the city's storied museums.

Which, in turn, points us to the Worst of Times. Michael Bloomberg's 2011 budget for New York City featured a \$20-million cut for culture, though this was [taken with relief](#) because it was not quite as catastrophic as feared. The Billionaire Mayor is [already back for more](#). In Los Angeles, smooth-talking Mayor Villaraigosa [proposed](#) a "crisis mode" arts budget earlier this year. The Illinois Arts Council is in such dire straights that it has had to [chronically delay](#) the delivery of funding. In Florida, the state arts council [ate a cut](#) of over one half this year. And so on.

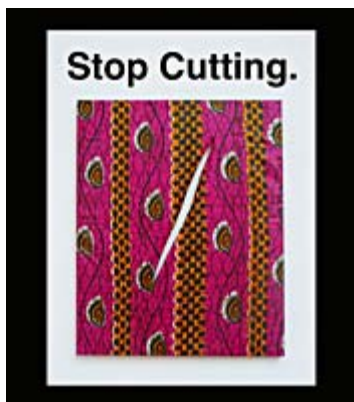
This is how the "two-track economy" makes itself felt in the cultural sphere. Officially, the Great Recession is over. But corporate profitability has been restored mainly due to layoffs and wage-cutting. The economy has bifurcated, with one side doing OK, but this OKness coming at the expense of everyone else. Meanwhile, in a stunning display of trickle-down economics in reverse ("suck up" economics?), the banks have been restored to semi-health courtesy government bailouts, but then have demanded austerity cuts to government budgets if they are going to continue to advise their clients to buy the bonds that fund the resulting deficits.



Alberto Giacometti
L'homme qui marche I
 1960/1961
 \$104.3 million
 Sotheby's London
 Feb. 3, 2010



Pablo Picasso
Nude, Green Leaves and Bust
 1932
 \$106.4 million
 Christie's New York
 May 4, 2010



Yinka Shonibare's *Stop Cutting*,
 produced for Save The Arts in the UK

Of course, art dealers, even top dealers, are just doing their thing. Galleries are selling luxury goods -- contemporary art is maybe the all-time top luxury good, in addition to being a highly speculative investment -- so expecting galleries to offer some kind of organic reflection of the precarious reality of the 1 in 10 Americans who can't find work would be a bit ridiculous.

Still, complacency kills. The fates of the non-profit and for-profit art sectors may seem uncoupled, but in fact, they are intimately connected. In *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark*, Dan Thompson gives a thumbnail sketch of the art world by the numbers: He estimates there are 80,000 artists in the art capitals of New York and London; of these, about 75 are "superstar artists with seven-figure incomes"; about 300 more are "mature, successful artists who show with major galleries and earn six-figure incomes from art." Below that, even artists who are showing are not really making a living off their artwork.

The notion that the commercial art world stands on its own is just another myth bequeathed to us by the art bubble. For the vast majority of artists, small nonprofits, government grants, teaching positions and encouraging curators at regional and local museums form part of the indispensable support network that allows them to sustain a creative practice. Without these, some will drop out, or will not find space to do things that aren't already market-tested, and the pool of talent that the commercial section feeds on will contract. Robust public support is part of what makes a vibrant arts scene.

But here's the rub: To advocate effectively for public support for the arts, the public must actually believe that art is a public good. And this is where the sense of irrelevance that comes from passively basking in art's semi-privileged status as a luxury good comes back to bite.

To see what I mean, look across the Pond to England, where the shimmering Frieze Fair Week dawns as the country's cultural sector faces what the Brits like to call "swingeing" cuts, provoking considerable protest from arts advocates. The problem, as *Guardian* columnist Jonathan Jones **points out**, is that "the success of Britain's artists is a major reason many people will support cuts to visual art funding." It's a non sequitur to have **Damien Hirst's** name on a petition about how needy the arts sector is -- "He is Mr. Money. Who, outside the art world, is going to see him as a plausible voice against arts cuts?"

And that, in a nutshell, sums up where we find ourselves in 2010, with art being stretched on the rack of the two-track economy. Dire things wait unless this trap is seen for what it is. Particularly now, art needs to feel relevant and in touch with reality -- and not just rich-guy reality, or even just smart-set reality. Accepting success on the terms that are on offer is also a road to failure.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com

**I DO NOT WANT
ART
FOR A FEW
ANY MORE THAN I WANT
EDUCATION
FOR A FEW, OR
FREEDOM
FOR A FEW**
WILLIAM MORRIS

Poster by Jeremy Deller, Scott King and
William Morris, for Save The Arts in the
UK