Speculations on the Production of Social Space in Contemporary Art, With Reference to Art Fairs

by Ben Davis
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Frieze New York
(Courtesy Getty Images)

The arrival of Frieze in New York last week provided the occasion for a number of important commentators to ruminate on the new prominence of fairs in general in the business of art. Most striking was Peter Schjeldahl's lengthy piece for the New Yorker, with the punchline being provided by an unnamed dealer who foundered after abstaining from art fairs: “I thought I could do without them. I couldn't.” Well, I am going to go one better, and say that the fair experience reflects not just the new "event-based" way art is sold, but also of the new "event-based" way that art itself functions, in how we experience it and how it relates to society.

Racing around Frieze’s big tent, I had a sort of epiphany, the equivalent of the moment when you realize that the outline of the vase is actually two faces looking at each other. I suddenly had the very strong sense that the art, the supposed point of

all this, was the *excuse* for the event itself, rather than the other way around. Background and foreground switched places.

Many dealers that I talked to said that they were selling mainly to collectors they already knew. That's a heck of an ordeal to put yourself through, and a heck of an expense, just to get people to buy things you had on offer anyway. But art fairs are where art gets its social articulation, and it is the social cachet of owning art that collectors are there for. And not just collectors; I kept running into colleagues who said variations on the following: "I didn't really come for the art; I'm here to catch up with people who are in town." Hence the "Stockholm syndrome-like mentality" that Holland Cotter writes about in the Times, where even people who lament fairs' effect on art show up anyway.

In some ways this is just a further distillation of the culture of art openings, where people often seem to go more for the social spectacle than for whatever is on view. The whole complex of openings and dinners and events feels like its own rolling attraction, semi-autonomous from the art, and semi-overpowering it.

Now, there has been plenty of chatter about art becoming an appendage of "event culture" lately. To understand why I think this is so interesting, I guess I should explain that for some time nowI have been operating under the assumption that contemporary visual art, when thought of as the production of images, is not actually that contemporary. It is, rather, kind of old-fashioned, oriented on a notion of the unique object inherited from craft traditions, the tribal rituals of bohemians, and the rarified argot of university intellectuals — all of which seems particularly small-scale and self-limiting when compared to the industrial populism of films or video games. In my opinion, art's minor-ness is actually its strength, since it still holds onto traces of countercultural values and a human perspective.

But here's the thing: You can't argue that there's anything minor about Frieze New York, with its astounding bespoke tent, its transformation of a whole new region of the city into a destination, and of course its airy, unapologetic determination to break union labor in the City. So what gives contemporary art its cultural potency, so different from other old-school cultural forms (can you imagine an equivalent for poetry?) or other collectable and investment-grade objects (stamps? gold bars?)

Well, there's the sheer spectacle of money on view, of course — but I actually believe that that's only half the story. In a kind of reversal, in some ways art's very backwardness, its local-ness, gives it its magical contemporary power: You have to go to experience art, it doesn't come to a theater near you, isn't delivered to a screen in your living room, and so it naturally makes the perfect material to build a destination event around. Meanwhile, it is the very tribalism and cliquishness of the art world that allows it to project a kind of mythologized, fungible aura of exclusivity and cachet.

In this way art is, unexpectedly, avant garde again, in that it is working on a problem that other, more ubiquitous cultural industries are trying to solve: Hollywood is trying to make going to the cinema an event again with 3D film; the music industry is reemphasizing the concert experience now that it's harder and harder to monetize recordings.

We still think of what we are involved in as "visual art," because we still think of it as fundamentally about the production of images. Even the academics who drone on about Duchamp's "anti-optical" radicalism still frame his anti-art in a tense, negative dialogue with its identity as an image. Yet as a mechanism for the production of visual imagery, all but the most lavish contemporary art tends to be minor and parasitical on other, more technologically sophisticated industries of image-manufacture.

Nevertheless, every flourishing discipline needs something to specialize in, to make its own, in order to win its place in the world. And it seems to me that contemporary art's actual specialty has become the production of a certain kind of social space. In other words, we shouldn't think about the world we participate in as being devoted to "visual art"; we should think about it as devoted to "social art."

The big institutions have realized this, or are in the process of realizing it. Marina Abramovicmade performance art — *the* stereotypically mocked example of crazy-eyed contemporary-art weirdness — into a door-busting blockbuster for MoMA by turning it into a space for people to experience themselves as part of her special circle of narcissism. Up next is Martha Rosler's interactive garage sale, and don't be surprised if MoMA's atrium becomes the museum's rotating home for these kind of tribal experiments. The New Museum had its biggest hit ever with Carsten Höller's goofy slide, and at least one marketing guru praised the museum for demonstrating

that what the contemporary cultural "consumer" needs is constant social engagement. And, lest we forget, the most popular show in the world last year was a Brazilian M.C. Escher exhibition that was, more than anything else, an optical illusion theme park, where people could experience themselves actually becoming part of Escher's trippy works.

“Relational aesthetics,” that do-goodery theory about redeeming everyday social processes as art — eating, sleeping, etc. — may prove simply to have been the mediating conceptual device by which art institutions realized their strength as intellectual carnival attractions (much the way we all thought the Huffington Post was some kind of place for overlooked liberal voices to get exposure, and it turned out to be a model for journalism in an age where journalists don’t get paid). That’s what Hegel called the “ruse of reason,” by which, while thinking you were doing one thing, you were actually acting out some deeper unfolding logic.

But how, finally, to square this observation — that the contemporary-ness of contemporary art is the social form in which it is presented, not the visual objects that it creates — with the fact that art is still, largely, about the production of visual objects? As Schjeldahl noted, with his characteristic acuity, the art of art fairs tends to be flashy objects, very much in the old sense. Well, every performance needs suitably interesting props. The increasingly explicitly social and performative dimension of contemporary art makes explicit what is only implicit in "event-based" art carnivals like Frieze; or, rather, the art fair's aesthetic achievement is to become the vehicle to grant some of this jocular aura to art that is otherwise introspective, esoteric, or mute. Embedded in the environment of the art fair or the art opening, the objects on view realize their status as “conversation pieces,” as excuses for a very specific social interaction. In the future, we may remember this epoch of art as being, above all, about the production of some very clever theme parties.

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