

## How Small It Actually Is

Alex Zafiris interviews Ben Davis

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*The art critic and activist discusses the power structures of the art empire, the drive to present artists as heroes, and the idea that art practice is middle-class labor.*



Book cover art by [William Powhida \(http://williampowhida.com/wordpress/\)](http://williampowhida.com/wordpress/)

As with all empires, the art world is driven by money. What differentiates it, at least in some

cases, is its very particular set of values. Constantly in flux, beholden to the zeitgeist, the outwardly glamorous business of contemporary art can occasionally elude even the most experienced players. Rare are success stories borne from talent and ideas alone. Aside from a handful, even artists with successful careers earn modestly, or, at the very least, have suffered the indignity of “misplaced” payments and contract betrayals, with scant resources to protect themselves. Few people actually buy art; those who do often make decisions informed by facile trends, egged on by art dealers and gallery owners who need to turn a profit. Many creators compromise their visions to sell. Curators, art writers, and others have elaborated on these problems loudly, in the media and elsewhere, but rather than shifting the paradigm, their voices have become part of the chorus. Much of the new work on display bewilders and infuriates the general public. Talk of change is exhausting. Complaining about money is embarrassing. Yet, at the heart of it all is genuine work, and true discourse, kept alive by dogged creators and supporters who believe in the transformative power of art.

In 2010, Ben Davis, a young art critic and regular contributor to *Art Papers*, *ArtReview*, *Adbusters*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Slate*, and the *Village Voice*, produced a pamphlet, “9.5 Theses on Art and Class,” that pointed out that the discussion of artist economics had stagnated. In it, he boldly outlines the paradoxes and struggles inherent in the art world through the lens of class. Last year, he published his first book, [9.5 Theses on Art and Class](http://www.powells.com/partner/41288/biblio/9781608462681?p=ti) (<http://www.powells.com/partner/41288/biblio/9781608462681?p=ti>), named for and containing the original pamphlet, alongside a collection of essays on politics, inequality, commerce, and hipster aesthetics in art. He posits that artists are middle-class creative laborers, only mildly distinct from their non-artist peers in that their autonomy stems from a singular, individual talent.

Davis is a self-proclaimed Marxist, and his perspective is rooted in equality, simplicity, and realism. He writes, “Art’s self-satisfied pluralism is also a *guarantee* of the inequality surrounding art,” and, “The art system only functions by maintaining some legitimate claim on artistic ‘quality,’ a concept that is elastic enough to include some degree of snobbishness and blind imitation of fashion as well as some representation of legitimate human aspirations.” His research is extensive and his tone is frank and buoyant: “If you are going to have any way to interact with contemporary art positively, you need some theory that is more nuanced than that on offer.”

Previously the executive editor of *Blouin Artinfo* and now senior writer at *artnet*, Davis is also a human rights activist, which he believes makes his art criticism stronger. He regularly attends marches for immigrant rights, same-sex marriage, and Occupy Wall street, and was among the throng at the recent New York City Climate March. In recent months, he has protested the police killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, and Israel’s actions in Gaza. He has also been organizing for the Howie Hawkins/Brian Jones Green Party run for governor.

Davis's book has affirmed his position as one of the most exciting and well-respected art critics writing today. I corresponded with him over email in early September.

—Alex Zafiris for *Guernica*



Image by Micah Schmidt

**Guernica:** The ongoing, central tension of the art empire is that between creativity and money. The parameters of this conflict vary wildly, depending on whom you speak to. Can you define it from your personal point of view?

**Ben Davis:** I guess I'd challenge the premise of the question. I don't think that the ongoing tension of the "art empire"—if by this we mean the top tier of the international "art world," museums, galleries, and auction houses—is actually between money and creativity, in the sense that there is a hard choice between what sells and artists getting to express themselves in some

authentic creative way.

That certainly happens, and the very rich control the art market, which means a minority taste—often a pretty stupid and crass taste—has a disproportionate amount of influence over what succeeds. But throughout history, the very rich have also patronized, funded, and wanted to associate themselves with creative things. If things were as simple as the equation “success = corruption” then you wouldn’t need criticism.

I happen to like Jasper Johns. He was one of the first artists to sell out a gallery show of new work, setting that pattern for art stardom. I still like his work.

I don’t know if there even is a central contradiction of the art world, because I don’t think that the “art world,” if we are going to use that term, has a center. I think Lawrence Alloway is still right [in saying] that it is more like a network: overlapping and competing institutions that constitute a common space but with no common end.

But here’s one interesting thing you could say about art’s contradictory relationship to money: there’s a contradiction between how universal or important contemporary art thinks it is to society, and how small it actually is. The massive sale numbers at auction disguise the fact that, relatively speaking, tiny numbers of people care about art, even with all the talk about a new breakthrough of art into pop culture.

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**Guernica:** The contemporary art dialogue is obtuse and enraging for the uninitiated or uninvited. While education and money are surer ways of becoming involved, they are not a guarantee.

**Ben Davis:** Educational attainment is the single biggest predictor of whether someone enjoys going to museums and art galleries. More than money. That’s worth just saying, because it explains the perception that it cuts across barriers and the very real limits to this.

I actually think we are in a pretty disorienting time. Yes, art writing is often kind of abstract, and people often write about art as if their real audience is a professional society of Deleuze scholars, or the keepers of some kind of Skull-and-Bones-like secret faith of “true painting.” That’s not purely innocent: this stuff sells for big money because wealthy and often very unsavory people think it buys them into the smart set, so a certain level of vague seriousness suits that agenda.

On the other hand, I am pro-ideas; in fact, pro-*difficult* ideas. There’s no reason why any one work of art has to be legible to all people. In the best-case scenario, art that is not of your own time or culture is going to require some difficulty in order to truly unlock. The problem with a lot of art theory is not that it’s difficult but that it doesn’t really justify the effort; it’s just common wisdom disguised in big words.

One major contemporary trend in art is *away* from difficulty, toward really big objects, toward fashion: splashy gestures that go down easy. The old charge that museums are “elitist” doesn’t really feel totally right to me. MoMA’s doing a Björk show. The big institutions have found that buzz and long lines can replace intellectual cachet at a certain level, for the purpose of pleasing funders.

The anthropologist Matti Bunzl was embedded at the MCA Chicago as they were planning their Jeff Koons retrospective a few years ago, and the takeaway is that critics who accuse institutions of selling out miss the dynamic of what is actually going on. From the inside, he said, it looks very much like the curators are fighting for difficult ideas, but that this is a difficult and a rearguard battle, because they are under huge pressure to deliver crowds and please the patrons, because art funding is going away.

But I think both poles exist and there’s no one tendency. You have to be critical of the obscurity and stuffiness in a way that isn’t also a sop to corporate populism, and vice versa. I think that’s one of the things that a real political criticism might do.

**Guernica:** Artistic practice is most often defined as a privileged activity, whereas “creative expression” is something that transcends social, political, and economic barriers. What kind of traction does exceptional individual power—charisma, talent, skill, unusual perspective—really have? Who/what is the authority?

**Ben Davis:** I mean, this only becomes an issue because some people actually make their living off of their creativity, and what’s more, some people who make their living off their creativity, contemporary artists, seem to get a particularly good deal. Otherwise, it would be enough to say that, well, we all are creative in our own ways, what’s wrong with that?

But that having been said, there's a whole interesting debate right now about whether creative labor actually is a "privileged" activity. There's very much this sense that the "privilege" of art is being used to seduce people into doing work for free, to get away with not paying people who are creating something of value, and who have to survive.

So you have designers protesting and ridiculing the trend of turning everything into a contest, where you make work for free for the chance of getting a job, essentially formalizing the lottery odds of the creative economy into an actual lottery. You have a book like Astra Taylor's *The People's Platform* (<http://www.powells.com/biblio/9780805093568>) catching fire, which talks about how the Internet has eroded the basis for creative people to support themselves as professionals, by turning creative content into "free culture." And there is a flourishing of artist activism around the issue of getting paid, and of building solidarity with other kinds of workers as well, which you saw with the Teamsters lockout at Sotheby's during Occupy. You have even A.O. Scott writing in the *New York Times* about "The Paradox of Art as Work."

That having been said, I agree with Julia Bryan-Wilson that the attempt to reclaim the term "art worker," and reframe being an artist as just like any other type of work, is a move that conceals as much as it illuminates. In fact, Bryan-Wilson's work, in her book *Art Workers* (<http://www.powells.com/biblio/65-9780520269750-1>) and elsewhere, can be looked at as a way to document how things go wrong when you produce such a false identification.

So, I think my own theory about artistic labor in *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, that we can think of the artist in a certain classical Marxist sense as occupying a position different than a normal worker, but still different than a boss—artists as being a traditional example of the "middle class"—offers a very clear and concrete way to think about what is unique about being a contemporary artist, how it is distinct from other kinds of things people do, while still thinking about it as a form of labor. It's a way of approaching the problem without reducing the conversation to some kind of spiritual or mystical theory of creativity, or thinking of the notion of "art as work" as an unsolvable "paradox." If you can have a theory that does that, you have a sober basis to analyze the political situation and build up real solidarity.

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**Guernica:** The contemporary art world is heavily entangled with, and dependent upon, the capitalist world, and yet retains an aura of mystery and allure that is also central to its machinations. How does this persist, and how is it problematic?

**Ben Davis:** I can think of a couple of ways to interpret this question.

One is about the market. I think there is a lot of hyperventilating about art being taken over by finance. But art is not actually a very good investment commodity, as far as any empirical data goes. You can make a lot of money on individual bets, and those are what get the attention, but overall it's a huge gamble, and people lose more than win.

It seems to me that the art market has a kind of secondary status in relation to the whole economy. It's a playground for rich people, people who have extracted massive amounts of surplus cash through old-fashioned exploitation and want respectability and diversion. They have huge wads of cash, more than they can ever do anything with because inequality is at record highs, so they can spend amazing amounts on luxury goods.

If you try and argue with people on the street about labor exploitation as a central driver of the economy, eventually they will bring up art, how labor exploitation doesn't explain the sale price of a Picasso. The example of what aristocrats would pay for paintings is one of the oldest objections to the idea that labor creates value, before Marx, going back to Adam Smith. In the art market, value seems to come out of nowhere, paintings zooming from nothing to millions of dollars for no apparent reason but whim, with no clear-cut exploitation (although, if you look at the Sotheby's lockout, that shows there's real, old-fashioned labor that goes into presenting this stuff too).

And I think that's actually an interesting ideological role the art market plays, as an exception: it is a sub-part of the economy that seems to be purely formed by ego and marketing. That is how, ideally, economic pundits would like to pretend the whole world works: if you have a good creative idea, value just magically accrues. So the art market's very existence serves a kind of function as a representation that value is a kind of magical thing.

But of course, it's an illusion: this particular market only works in the presence of very rich people who have massive amounts to bid against each other competitively. And their money comes from somewhere, it's extracted from workers, or through monopoly and all kinds of shady things. So, in that way it is, as you say, both entangled with and somehow autonomous from the ordinary, grubby life of capitalism; it reflects it and refracts it.

The second thing this question makes me think of comes back to my own definition of the professional artist as a “middle-class creative laborer.” Most working people just don’t have any say in the creative content of their own labor; that’s part of the definition of being a worker, you trade your labor to someone else and they get to tell you what to do. So, the idea that there is a category of person in society who both gets to do, to a certain extent, what they want and make money doing it takes on some kind of special aura because it is an exception: precisely because most people are alienated in their work, the dream of being an “artist” takes on some exaggerated societal importance as an image—even though the reality for most “working artists” is more complex, and most people who call themselves “artists” actually make money somewhere else.

In truth, the fact that people present themselves as “actually” an artist and only temporarily or incidentally an office worker or whatever shows the powerful ideological function this idea of the “artist” holds on people, as this kind of imaginary escape.

From that angle, the “aura of mystery” is not a pure illusion. There is something *really* mysterious about contemporary art that makes it seem like this carnival of individualisms; the conditions of being a professional artist are just not the same as the conditions faced elsewhere, even elsewhere in the creative economy. The art-school industry in some ways sells a highly commodified version of the idea of escaping normal labor.

**Guernica:** You outline the problems of political art, namely, the self-serving artist/patron/institution and the issues of aesthetics and context in such work. You conclude that actual engagement must come first.

**Ben Davis:** I’m not the only one to point out the problem with “political art,” in the way that it has become a brand. In my book, I quote other people who’ve had this critique. What I consider semi-unique in my theory is the attempt to come up with a critique of “political art” that doesn’t reject either “politics” or “art.”

I do object to the attempt to create a single political formula for the “engaged artist.” I would object to saying to anyone, “Your duty as an artist who cares about political things is X.” That’s part of why I deliberately don’t develop a positive theory about how to be a political artist in my book. Art can serve so many different functions, and there’s value—even political value—in art that doesn’t serve any direct propaganda purpose. In some ways, if you are an anti-capitalist, that’s what you are fighting for, a world where you don’t have to have all your labor subordinated to some immediate goal.

**Guernica:** Jeff Koons is currently the most visible figure in contemporary art; he has become a symbol of the worst characteristics of the art world, namely, elitism and power-mongering just for

the sake of it. Your recent article in *Artnet*, "[Jeff Koons as the Art World's Great White Hope](http://news.artnet.com/art-world/jeff-koons-as-the-art-worlds-great-white-hope-48048)" (<http://news.artnet.com/art-world/jeff-koons-as-the-art-worlds-great-white-hope-48048>) points out previously undiscussed problems relating to race that occur in his work. Why do you think these things escape notice so easily? Or are they just ignored?

**Ben Davis:** I disagree with the characterization of Koons as "elitist." I mean, they are big, shiny, mirrored things. He has a pop-culture following. In some ways, he embodies the weird moment that we are living in that I mentioned earlier, where the art world is both kind of cut off from the rest of the world and also increasingly freeing itself of a need to have anything really to say besides providing a mirrored surface to take a selfie in.

Critically, the conversation is more or less frozen: the critique of Koons is always pretty much that the work is brainless, rich-guy populism, and it gets tiresome to repeat that over and over. In the essay you mention, I talk about a particular text at the current Whitney Museum about Koons's famous sculpture of Michael Jackson and Bubbles. The wall label quotes Koons as saying that he loves how Jackson lightened his skin to appeal to "more middle-class white audiences." And that's just such a weird, tone-deaf statement—and particularly because the Whitney had just passed through this controversy about how white the Whitney Biennial was, with artists in the show even protesting, it is stunning that the museum let that through without even seeming to be critical at all.

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It just makes a point that there is a subtext to the universalizing of Koons's message about turning off the critical mind and just embracing what makes you happy. You really realize that you can only get away with it as a white guy, because people are only willing to read the kinds of simple pleasures you are into as universal if you are coded as universal yourself. And you *particularly* realize that fact because you see that some of the early work, "Equilibrium" and "Luxury and Degradation," actually has a subtext about race. The "Equilibrium" works, the basketballs in the tanks, are presented all the time without the accompanying posters of black athletes, or Koons's confused statements critiquing how basketball culture seduces inner-city black

youth. I give the Whitney credit for bringing that material back to the discussion, although they've clearly swallowed his shtick too much; the way it is presented amounts to restating the wisdom of his Koonisms with a slightly more serious tone.

As for your other question, about why these matters are overlooked: I just think that there is a tremendous drive to present artists as heroes, to flatten out any contradiction, and to downplay any criticisms, because of all the commercial pressures to deliver an easy product. With historical shows, this means that a lot of history is bracketed out, so you get a kind of "parade of treasures" effect. With contemporary shows, this means that the default presentational mode is preemptive hagiography, which in Koons's case means trying, absurdly in my mind, to find a kernel of secret critical resistance in his later works. In the catalogue for the show, the curator celebrates Koons's ability to defy notions of taste, positing that his sculptures look "aggressive and out of place" in the home of rich collectors even though they have become accessories that every tycoon must have, and saying that "Koons's art rarely feels chic" at the very same moment that the Whitney is promoting H&M's Koons bag.

**Guernica:** At the end of your chapter "White Walls, Glass Ceiling," about female underrepresentation in the art world, you include a coda, saying, "the connections made in this essay point to how the fight for equality can be waged on the basis of genuine solidarity, in the name of a world where art's value escapes the deformities imposed upon it by an unequal society." Have you encountered opposition to your optimistic outlook?

**Ben Davis:** [It's] more that people find the book depressing, actually. I think people very much want a simple formula, simple positive examples to model themselves on. And in one way, the point of the book is that you can't solve art's problems through art alone, so there is no simple art formula I offer. For people who are still wholly within that world or want to define themselves only in relation to artistic practice, that can be frustrating. You actually need to be involved with solving problems that are not artistic ones.

That's the main kind of resistance I get. People are very willing to talk radical. But, with artists, I find that the conversation has this inevitable drift, where we start out talking about structural and political problems, and pretty soon people want to talk about their own practice as an artist, and pretty soon you are not talking about politics at all.

**Guernica:** It has been a year since your book was published. Have you changed your mind about anything?

**Ben Davis:** As I've toured outside of New York for the book, I've found it interesting how the conversation is the same and different. You really feel how the illusion of money distorts

everything in New York, how that orients how people think about themselves as professional creative people, because there's this image of a hungry market that defines what that role looks like. Where there's not a market, people don't have those illusions.

But it's a different version of the same question. Instead, the "social practice" conversation is huge, artists making the case for creativity as something *useful* to the community. So people still see themselves ideally as "middle-class creative laborers" in this way I define it, as bringing together something they want to do, something they have creative control over, with a living. But instead of looking to the market and galleries, they are looking to nonprofits and grants and different kinds of community organizations. It's a different, in some ways richer, conversation, though still with all the unresolved contradictions I talk about encoded into the identity of "artist."

The other thing I think about is that, increasingly, I feel how small the "art world" is. We live in such an interesting time of cultural change, and I actually don't think the crucial conversations about those things are taking place within art, which is so insular, so cozy, so secure in its own importance that it is hard to see how fast the way people consume images is changing.

I believe in contemporary art, I think interesting conversations can be had within it, conversations that matter more broadly. But to get to them, I think you have to step outside of art, and increasingly, I'd like to find a way to start from that perspective, a broader perspective, and then see if art has anything relevant to say about them. I don't know if I can write the kinds of things I think need to be written just with art as a starting point. Art criticism can't really be just about art and be critical.



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