

What the Fuck is the Value of Contemporary Art

Kalaija Mallery

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First, I must ask a question I am tired of arguing but begrudgingly posit: What the fuck even is Contemporary Art? After Dadaism, it appears that “Contemporary Art” can and will be anything *but* what is expected of it. At least, that’s how it went in the beginning. Nowadays, we all know that art making has a script. We all see “the moves”, the essence of such fueled on millennial trend and subculture movements; “Outsider”-Art, “Naive”-Art, “Non”-Art, “Art”-for-the-sake-of-“Art”, all seemingly innocent and sincere yet entirely calculable and executable: Desirable for collectors, critics, and curators, hungry for more after the death of our Postmodern predecessors.

As this shift into the Contemporary took place we saw a displacement of the “good” art that existed before it. We have a whole slew of the dejected Modernists and Conceptualists; who adapted an appreciation and exploration of medium before they were told to reject it; or our aforementioned Postmodernists that went to art school, got MFAs and became immediately disappointed or disillusioned about their craft — the work they did sought to expand histories and potentials. Our museums are filled with the relics of these Young Overachievers. They did good work and we Appreciate Them. And now, now we’re in a space where anything can be art but nothing is, and not even conceptual integrity is “good” enough to justify art making.

So again, what in the ever-loving fuck is the value of Contemporary Art?

These days we just want the most extreme reaction at the lowest cost. We just want to feel good about ourselves. And as Art that operates in the Market is guilty in most forms of upholding Supremacy, (even if the art does not want to be there! It most likely doesn’t!) you just can’t have Capitalism without fighting for scraps and screwing others over to get yours... all Art that sells is culpable of violence.

This is not to be confused with art-making itself inherently being a violative act — indeed, it is true that art-making (in an age of technical subordination) is a form of intellectual and emotional liberation through creativity — but the commodification of art into Art makes it an inevitable losing game for the creator’s wellbeing. The Art is now killing the Artist. By their own hands.

And now we have the Art School Industrial Complex. What’s more Contemporary than that? We pump out new Artists like Dr. Seuss’s “Star-Bellied Sneetches” and then wonder why everyone ends up in the service industry. Supply and Demand, baby. We all think we’re going to be the exception to the rule. I’m trying to tell you that there are no exceptions without consequence.

And that's not even touching on the fucked up politics of space — who shows after Grad School, and how they get shows, and how they sell at shows if they even do. It's just to say that the act of true creative liberation, true freedom through art making, is a lost practice.

Now we also have a whole slew of artists out here making Social Practice Art, or some would say, "Socially-Engaged" Art, which is often essentially just art that uses people's experiences, bodies, or livelihood to carry its weight. And most of the time the credit and the funding still go back to the Artist as if they are some genius for collecting people's thoughts and feelings for them. This skirts the importance of "other persons" labor and turns it into something that is awe-inspiring for the viewing of the bourgeoisie. (Cos let's be honest folks, the bourgeoisie still have their hands up the ass of most of us who make art, like little puppets).

Don't get me wrong — I like socially-engaged works as a concept. The most earnest work I've seen in this realm is done in New York and uses other Artists as the subjects of the work. Most often this is done privately, so nobody ever knows about it. Largely, this is because it is motivated intrinsically, as we as Artists refuse our fate as income-less laborers and try to problem solve together. This work humanizes us. The pursuit of asserting our lives, our thoughts, feelings, and bodies together is more helpful than going out into the world and stealing that from the "other" to make a show of it. It also asserts that our lives have value in a system that for so long (since Artist was even an occupation, which was about the turn of the 19th century) has denied us of that right.

In neoliberal society, it is radical to commune over problem-solving in our daily lives.

We have been told to accept that we are lucky to make Art at all, and maybe that is true. But I refuse to accept that the artist must be sad, must be destitute and crazy. The number of times someone has told me about Van Gogh and his ear. Fuck right off!!!

What I'm arguing for, really, is a shift in understanding about what the fuck is truly innovative, truly fucking contemporary in the realm of Art and Art-Making. Socially-engaged works are the beginning of something, because they attempt to level the playing field about participants in art, but they missed the point a little, because they still rely on the funding and reception of the upper-class echelon, and the work still desires institutional clout. Most of the Contemporary physical works that appear to be "underground" (listed earlier) still rely on taste (and clout) in order to attain their capital value.

So I ask you, Artist, will you strike?

Art made by non-artists and Art engaged by artists for each other is the only Contemporary Art that matters, because it is not made to sell, not made to show, not made to advance a career or get you a teaching job somewhere. In this way, this kind of art is the most Sincere. In this way, the Art made without the assumption of Genius or the purpose of capital is the exact way we are going to liberate ourselves as makers and thinkers. To accept that position may be hard, because it would mean all of us are out of a job. But when you think about it, what job did we ever have in the first place?

If you are able to set aside the desire for obtaining Genius status, dear Artist, then perhaps you will understand why I ask you to quit your job and make art. Then you will truly be fucking liberated.

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Text:

Kalaija Mallery

Editors:

Lindsay Costello

Karen Krolak

Zach Whitworth

Design:

Zach Whitworth

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