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# The Fracturing of Globalization

Julian Stallabrass

## The World

The art world really became a world following the collapse of Eastern European communism from 1989 onwards. Biennials sprouted in new markets across the globe, artists from Asia, Africa and South America began to appear in major exhibitions in significant numbers, contemporary art scenes evolved outside the USA, Japan and Europe, and it became plausible to conceive of the art world less as a constellation of fixed centres and more as a series of flows from one locale to another, accompanied by flocks of private jets. Yet lately, the comfortingly multicultural scene that emerged has been subject to serious political and economic stresses, which have already sufficiently disturbed that world to have produced within it some very strange phenomena, and which threaten to break it apart entirely.

'Globalization' is, of course, a complex and much contested term, but for our purposes it can be taken to mean the consequences of the freer circulation of money, investment and goods (but not, at least officially, of labour), and of the unequal international trade and legal agreements that regulated that freedom. Space seemed to shrink as rapid travel became cheaper, and especially through the wider availability of data communication systems, phones and the Internet. In its much-publicized utopian moment, the globe became a universal play-area for the rich and for multinational capital. But globalization also encompasses the multicultural slums of the world's mega-cities; the trade in human and animal bodies, and in pollution; the increasingly widespread ruination of the environment; and indentured or even slave labour. So it encompasses the greatest freedom and the greatest oppression, each structurally bound to its opposite.

The emergence of globalization was also aligned with neoliberal politics and economics (this despite the nationalist rhetoric





Alexander Kosolapov, *Mickey and Minnie: The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman*, 2004.  
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of the pioneering neoliberal governments – of Thatcher, Reagan and Pinochet – which was a mask for the radical erosion of national economies and cultures). So globalization in part caused, and was accompanied by, the familiar effects of neoliberal political and economic policies: the elevation of finance and service economies over industry, rising inequality, the decline of the labour movements, and the emergence of a large and structural mass of the under- and unemployed.

Until recently, there were good reasons to think that the globalization of the art world had its limits and did not fully reflect the general globalization of the economy. The dominance of the New York art scene was one factor here: while many artists from China, Brazil, South Africa, Russia and Cuba became prominent, many of them also ended up living and working in New York. The USA, and New York in particular, dominated the buying and selling of contemporary art, and as a consequence much of the language and terms of its reception.<sup>1</sup>

In the last few years, however, there have been profound and very rapid commercial changes, particularly in the rise of Chinese, Indian and Russian art, and with it of indigenous markets. There has been a five-fold increase in the size of the Indian contemporary art market in a few years; and a ten-fold increase in average

1. For a fuller account, see my book *Art Incorporated* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 2.

auction prices achieved for Indian art between 2004 and 2008.<sup>2</sup> Of the top ten auction prices for contemporary art in 2007–2008, three went to Chinese artists – Cai Guo-Qiang, Zeng Fanzhi and Liu Xiaodong. Data on the best prices achieved in first sales at auction in 2007 (thus focusing on young artists) show that nearly three-quarters of the top 50 are Chinese, and (in a sense, more importantly) that over half their sales were made in China.<sup>3</sup> As remarkably, in the annual turnover of contemporary art at auction, in 2007–2008, China came within a hair's breadth of overtaking the UK, for long the second-largest market. This development has – taken place with breathtaking rapidity. The comparative dominance of the USA has declined, in line with its deeply troubled economy and the decreasing global hold of its ideological model. In the remarkable speculative fever that gripped the contemporary art world in the last five years, the promise of globalization was finally reflected in the market: successful artists could live (at least for some of the time) in Havana, Mumbai or Beijing and their works were purchased by domestic speculators and collectors. Those who wished to follow the developments in that world had to fly further and more often.

The longer-term globalization of the art world has in large part been propagated by the rise of the biennial. Here, ideally at least, the virtues of cultural hybridity and mobility are promoted through works of art and acts of curation that should erode fixed values and ideals, including national political attachments and Enlightenment principles (given their haunting by colonialism, the Holocaust and the Gulag). Indeed, there is suspicion of any firm identification, lest it yield some abuse of the Other. Much of the work shown at biennials exploits the charge produced by cultural splicing – socialist realism meets Disney, for instance, though the examples could be effortlessly multiplied. The positive message of the biennial, again ideally, gestures towards the emergence, through the intermixing of cultures, of a global consciousness in which all voices can be heard.

The hybrid art itself, like the spread of pigeons or rats, forces the local species into narrow and insecure ecological niches. In its shuffling of familiar post-conceptual devices and readily recognizable national symbols and concerns into an endless parade of novel combinations, it remains identified with its nation of origin. Fredric Jameson's well-known remarks about Third World literature being condemned to appear as an allegory of nation still applies to its art, but also to that of post-communist states, and increasingly to the art of the 'developed' world, too, when it is seized on by marketers for whom national identification is used as a convenient pre-existing brand.<sup>4</sup> Even when the work is not manifestly national-allegorical, it often gets read as such, urged along by interpretation material that insists on national identification, including those labels for works that include the artist's nation of origin. At first sight, this insistence on nation-labelling

2. *Le Marché de l'Art Contemporain 2007/8* (Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or: Artprice.com SA, 2008), 126.

3. *Ibid.*, 133.

4. Fredric Jameson 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, vol. 15 (1986), 65–88.



may appear to cut against the ideals of hybridity, but it celebrates the broadening ambit of neoliberal hybridity, the induction of culture after culture into the realm of free exchange, where a new set of cultural tokens becomes available for combination and trade.

That the process is far from complete was the point of a work by Antonio Muntadas for the Venice Biennale of 2005, entitled *Giardini*: a double-sided lightbox, it showed on one face photographs of all the Biennale's national pavilions, and on the reverse, a list – rather extensive – of all of the nations that do not show at Venice. There is, incidentally, a remarkable overlap between Muntadas' list of absentees and another list of nations – those of the 'bottom billion' as economically defined, of that part of the 'developing world' that does not develop.<sup>5</sup>

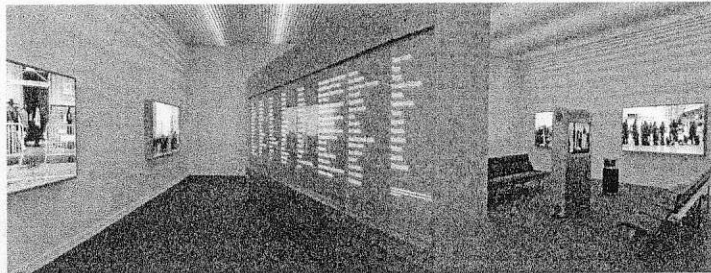
While the ideals of the biennial are politically liberal, they are also economically neoliberal – the scepticism towards all ideals that might establish barriers to global exchange, the denigration of the national, and the implicit endorsement through lack of critique of the 'natural' environment of the unfettered market. In its conventional recommendation of these neoliberal virtues, the art world celebrates as freedom all that is forced upon us.<sup>6</sup>

Since the cultural politics of the art world is in contradiction with its economic basis (or to be more precise, the economics of its production and consumption is in contradiction with the political outlook of the large majority of its viewers, if not owners), these neoliberal virtues have to hide themselves, and this concealment leads to a good deal of obfuscation in works of art, curating and the literature that might otherwise elucidate them.

There are, however, aspects of the art-world celebration of globalization that, beyond the irreducibly contradictory nature of globalization itself, tend to undermine the idealism of the biennial, and lead the viewer to critical thinking. There is the familiar critique of the easily recognizable standard character of 'biennial art', with its spectacular inflation of size, gestures towards political themes, and fairground air – products of hasty overproduction and the courting of easy controversy. There is the paradox, analysed by Elena Filipovic, that while the biennial is supposed to celebrate the local and the contingent, the standard

5. The list of the bottom billion is compiled by Paul Collier in his book *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009), 239–240.

6. This is one of the main arguments of my book, *Art Incorporated*, op. cit. (note 1).



Antonio Muntadas, *On Translation: I Giardini*, 2005, Pavillion On Translation, 51st Venice Biennial. Photo: Claudio Franzini. © Antonio Muntadas.

international-style white cube continues to reign as the wrapping in which the various products are offered.<sup>7</sup> There is the often-transparent character of the biennial in boosting the fortunes of some city or region in its efforts at gentrification, and in supporting – or even establishing – the local art market. The funding of these necessarily expensive collections of shows produces further visible instrumentalism which sits uneasily with the pure ideals of the biennial, from sponsorship (branded rest areas, for example) to the merchandizing of the event itself through the sale of souvenir mugs and other knickknacks.

Above all, however, the lure and trap of money mocks the liberal ideal of the biennial and the globalization of the art world in general. A central aspect of neoliberalism is the rise of inequality, with the long growth in the fortunes of the wealthy and especially the super rich at the expense, not merely of the poorest, but of an increasingly large section of wage earners, whose income has been declining now for decades.<sup>8</sup> The art world is one arena for the global super-rich elite to pursue their conspicuous expenditure. Their increasingly extravagant ways of marking themselves out from one another with gigantic yachts, private jets and helicopters, and vast mansions are of a piece with the love a proportion of them profess for art. As Joseph Bachstein, co-ordinator of the Moscow Biennial, wrote of the rise of the Russian collector: 'What is a rich Russian? It means you must have an apartment in Moscow, a Bentley, a dacha on Rublyovka, a house in London, a villa in Sardinia, and a yacht. Then you must buy modern art.'<sup>9</sup>

Sarah Thornton describes the hundred private jets that touch down in Basel for the art fair, and the fine gradings of sociocultural rankings for those jostling for position at Venice, where for some dealers the poolside of the Cipriani is their informal office.<sup>10</sup> What is purchased through participation in the art world, through collecting or patronage, is not merely or even primarily things, but access to a certain social set, a type of quasi-intellectual discourse, and a social cachet in which wealth is leavened by high culture – this is Bourdieu in practice.<sup>11</sup> That art which has made personal interaction its métier merely formalizes this arrangement by providing the global elite (already homogenized through wealth and cosmopolitanism) with eccentric opportunities for socializing.

There is another kind of tie to money, which is relatively new (and now endangered): art as a pure investment – especially as a hedge against the downward movement of other types of investment. It is this development that explains art's relative buoyancy in the downturn, and why the situation in the art world seems a little less dire than, for example, in the British property market or the US car market. There is generally a cost to owning art, which performs less well in gaining value than stocks and shares, and which is costly to insure, conserve and sell. That cost is part of the basis for its social cachet. The contemporary art bubble of the

7. Elena Filipovic, 'The Global White Cube', in: Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 63–84.

8. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

9. As quoted in Sophia Kishkovsky, 'Moscow Biennale Pokes Fun at Consumers and Politicians', *New York Times*, 10 March 2007.

10. Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (London: Granta, 2008), 78, 224, chapters 3 and 7.

11. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).



past five or so years changed that calculation, and instrumental investors moved in. One result has been the rapid lionization of young artists, since they offer the greatest opportunities for successful speculation. There was a frenzy to be in on the investment opportunity that the rising art market presented: during the run of the PS1 exhibition 'Greater New York', in 2005, which showed a large number of younger artists, those mentioned favourably in the press had queues of potential buyers outside their studios the following day.

The concerted manipulation of prices by hedge-fund traders, who have carefully chosen artists who they consider to be undervalued (whose prices are comparatively low but are held in prestigious collections and have a good critical reputation) have caused rapid and spectacular rises in the prices of some artists – Richard Prince being a model example.<sup>12</sup> Small groups of dealers and collectors also conspire to gather large amounts of an artist's work and drive up the price by bidding way over the odds for his or her work at auction.<sup>13</sup>

The art boom, now recognized as a bubble, has tended to produce a particular kind of work: spectacular objects that serve well as conversation pieces in the living rooms of billionaires. The focus on money, prestige and celebrity is in tension with the qualities of art that make it most valuable to that very elite, for it should gesture towards the higher realm of autonomous action and absolute, individual freedom, and not to the grubby world of the bottom line. (Damien Hirst, in recent works, including his notorious diamond-encrusted skull, almost makes this a theme.) Thus art may be seen as a paragon of globalized culture, in which the lingua franca is not American, and not even the English language, but simply money.

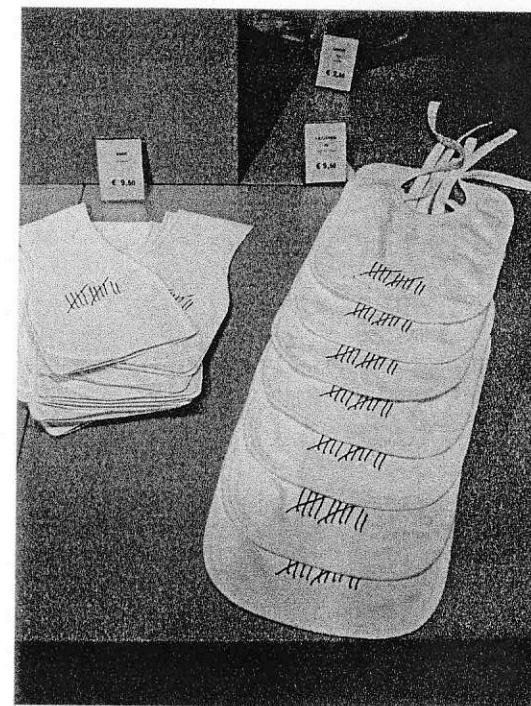
### The Break

The years of the art investment boom were also those of the 'war on terror'. While the excesses of the boom mocked the political ideals of cultural globalization, the war on terror – summed up in President Bush's position that you are either for us or against us – was a more direct assault. On both sides, after all, this was a way of dividing the world between terrorist and hero, religious fanatic and true believer, those who love death and those who love life. The invasions, kidnappings, beheadings, murders, torture, extra-legal imprisonment and the bombing of civilians (whether with home-made explosives or million-dollar missiles), much of it captured on photography and video for propaganda purposes, were the products of that division as it fractured the globalized ideal.

Multiculturalism itself came under attack, and the drawbacks as well as the virtues of hybrid mixing became evident. In the UK, this was illustrated graphically with British-born suicide bombers, an event that helped to bring about a volte face in state policy towards multiculturalism. There was a confrontation here with

12. See Molly Concannon, *Collecting Richard Prince: Strategies of a New Type of Investor in the Contemporary Market*, MA Dissertation, University of London (Courtauld Institute of Art), 2005, passim.

13. Marc Spiegler, 'Is the Art Market the "New Economy"?' in: Margriet Schavemaker and Mischa Rakier (eds.), *Right About Now: Art and Theory Since the 1990s* (Amsterdam: Valiz Publishers, 2007), 135.



documenta 12 merchandise.  
Photo: Julian Stallabrass.

others who were truly other, who were uninterested in swapping stories or recipes, and wanted only the death of apostates and the destruction of their culture.<sup>14</sup> With that confrontation came a widespread demonization of a broad swath of culture and religion.

At the same time, 'we' also became unrecognizable in our fundamentalism. The USA and its allies behaved in ways that were as alien to our purported values as were the acts of our enemies. Did we really have our agents snatch people from streets to be interned indefinitely in secret torture centres? Did we really imprison their children to extort information from prisoners? Even the new administration, acting on the intelligence of the whereabouts of some Al Qaida suspect, delivers a bomb to that location by pilotless drone. How is that morally different from detonating a truck bomb at a political parade?

In this, the (neo)liberal art world finds it hard to place itself: it can comfortably attack US neoconservative fundamentalism as a barrier to free flows of trade and culture, and does so often. More rarely, it can register the full extent of Western brutality. Can it also bring itself to attack Islamic fundamentalism? Or the broader cultural and religious predilections that bring it into existence? To do so would clash with one of its core values – an ethical respect for the 'other' that is the basis for free trade, free cultural

14. For the limits of liberal multiculturalism, see Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no. 225 (September-October 1997), 28-51.



exchange and even tourism. More fundamentally, the danger of any oppositional art, of an art that speaks too clearly and with too radical an intent, is that it takes on too clear a use, losing its art-like character to become a part of the mundane world of politics and propaganda. In its celebration of individual autonomy, art must never tie itself to use, or must only do so in gestures that are self-evidently futile or Quixotic.

Hence the hard-to-credit claims of artists, who on the face of it appear manifestly political, and whose work appears to set out to alter a political climate of opinion, such as Santiago Sierra and Regina José Galindo, that their art is meant to have no political effect. Hence, the continual playing up in contemporary political video and photography of the mechanisms and rhetoric of representation (for instance, in the work of Omer Fast), so that thoughts about political content face continual interference from those about how politics is represented.

As the boom and the war on terror coincided, the biennial, a thermometer of art world climates, registered both, crazily. So the phenomenon of the split biennial emerged, in which the formal and the political were pushed up against each other without sufficient reflection or mediation: signal examples here include Robert Storr's Venice Biennale, and Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack's documenta 12 (both 2007). This was the high art reflection of the fracturing of globalization – in broken and deeply split biennial displays, which no longer seemed to function placidly as the mere emanation of the aesthetic tastes and ideals of the curators, but must also register, with acute discomfort, the political storm that blows beyond their walls. Sometimes the decorative and the political met in bizarre works of political entertainment and spectacle. More often, the bewildered viewer, unenlightened by confused curatorial justifications, moved from decorative abstraction and knowing kitsch to large-scale displays of documentary photographic and video work that at least referred to the most hideous and desperate human situations. In the worst cases, the political, and even terror itself, was rendered aesthetic.<sup>15</sup> Curatorial pretensions to coherence were lost or wilfully abandoned.

### The Crash

Plainly, since autumn 2008, things have changed again with the growth of the global financial crisis, which has had a deep effect on the economy of art. Even in October 2008, contemporary art sales in London were badly affected, with many lots bought in, and others failing to meet their estimates – including works by major artists such as Gerhard Richter and Takashi Murakami. Buying has not ceased, and occasional signal prices are reached, to much publicity, though rarely with contemporary works. Recently, the number of contemporary art lots sold has halved, as has their average price. Compared with the previous season, the overall value of the auction market for contemporary art has

15. This is the argument of Oliver Marchart on documenta 12. See 'Schröder's Return: Documenta 12 as a German Summer-Camp of Reconciliation', in: Irene Montero (ed.), *¿Modernidad? ¿Vida? Documenta 12* (Madrid: Brumaria, 2007), 375–381.

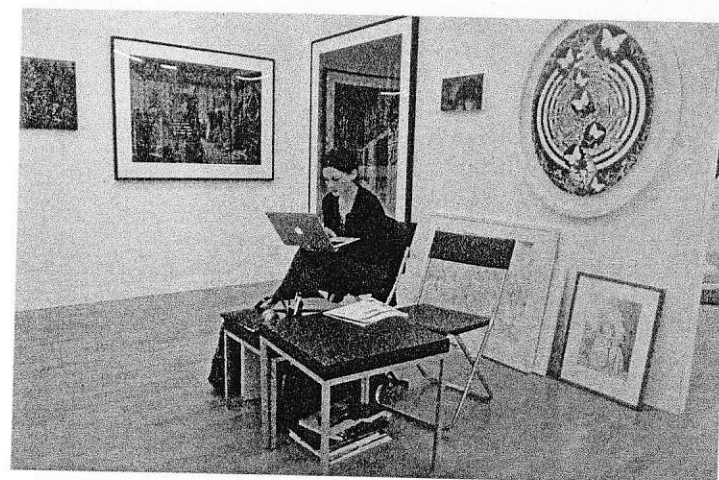
fallen even further by over three-quarters.<sup>16</sup> Hedge fund traders have been leaving the market. So the effect is already profound, and we are, most likely, at the beginning of this recession.

I have tried to come up with a visual illustration for the crisis, along the lines of those photographs of vast numbers of new cars sitting unsold near their factories; here a bored and lonely art dealer tries to amuse herself with papers and a laptop at the Zoo Art Fair in London last autumn.

It is too soon, of course, to say what will happen at this time of unique economic trouble. Art at a time of recession tends to become more innovative, as artists have to abandon the golden umbilical cord in their attempts to rethink their identity, exploit new technologies, and engage with issues that interest large numbers of people.

It may be that recession will lead, as it has done before, to new modes of working in which collaboration, dematerialization and the side-stepping of the market gain some traction. In a situation where the art world was split weirdly between an engagement with politics and the (rarely overlapping) gilding of the lives of the global elite, we may expect radical change when one half of the structure is suddenly chopped away. One might hope for a wave of work that is not only documentary but is also fixed on new technologies of communication, and that engages with its audience seriously in collaborative works of discourse, that, in short, takes democratic values seriously. One might even anticipate that biennials become more cogent reflections upon the extraordinary conditions of the world (political, economic, military and environmental) and the role that art plays in their propagation and critique. Yet it may be that the art world as it is currently constituted is unsuited to deliver such work, and that only a recession that is deep and long enough to change the basis

16. See Colin Gleadell, 'Art Sales Halved at Sotheby's and Christie's as the Recession Hits the Art Market', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 2009.



Art dealer at the Zoo Art Fair, London, October 2008. Photo: Julian Stallabrass.



of its economics, and the very conception of what an art work and an artist is, can change that.

We are, nevertheless, faced with two deep uncertainties: first, that the financial crisis is an unprecedented one – the first in the post-Cold War era to have done what previous crises threatened to do, and become global – and we have no idea of its length, depth or true character. Second, that in its unfolding, we have little notion of the shape of the power relations that will emerge in the world that follows: will this, for example, spell the end of US dominance, as many commentators have been warning for so long?<sup>17</sup> And, if so, where will the new centres be, and what will be the concerns of those who govern them? In that new world, it may be Europeans and North Americans who have to come to terms with the invasion of dominant alien species.

17. See, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power: The US in a Chaotic World* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

# Acting Out in the City

## Artistic Intervention as Production of Public Space

Hou Hanru

### Introduction

We are living in a time of urban spectacle. Contemporary art projects, whether international biennials or urban-scale art events, are an integral part of the rapid expansion of this spectacle. Meanwhile, we are also witnessing a worldwide dramatic trend of privatization, gentrification and social division: public spaces are being increasingly reduced, while civil society and democracy are under threat by the pressure of 'liberal' global capitalism. With the complacency of various political powers, neoliberalism and its economic counterpart, global capitalism, are becoming the homogenizing and even monopolizing model of economic, cultural and social production and exchange. And as a consequence, their impact on society and our public space is undeniable. While social justice, equality and solidarity are being undermined; protest and resistance against this dominant ideological and economic system are being mounted from the bottom of society. A key element in this conflict seems to be the deconstruction of a conception of the public sphere as the physical, political and cultural guarantee for democracy and social participation, in order to make way for a new notion of public space and publicness.

How do these conflicting dynamics play out in our everyday environments? In order to start to answer this question, I will try to sketch the impact of globalization and global capital on the transformation of our cities and societies by introducing some recent examples from China. Furthermore, I would like to take a closer look at some of the fundamental questions involved with curating public art events by asking, for instance, how we can understand this new notion of public space and its relation to the private. How can artistic activities and public art events like