Resisting the Pressures of the Global Art Market

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Christian Ruschitzka’s Garden Swing, a sculpture presented in the exhibition Artists’ Waste, Wasted Artists, is what Alfred Gell would describe as ‘the enchantment of technology’ (Gell 1992). But instead of dwelling on its aesthetic qualities, we shall ask the following question, namely, what can this sculpture reveal about the contemporary global art market pressures faced by the artists? This sculpture served as an inspiration for an, albeit limited, investigation of these current pressures. However, before we proceed and situate the artwork, we must briefly portray the shift in the anthropology of art towards the analysis of the global art world and the global art market, and critical approaches towards value construction and art academies.

Early works within the anthropology of art focused predominantly on the aesthetic approach to art objects and the examination of cross-cultural aesthetics (Gell 1998, 5; Coote 1992, 1996, Murphy 1994, 1996). The category of aesthetics as sensuous perception was central to anthropologists like Coote, who in his famous Marvels of Everyday Vision (1992) argued for an anthropology of aesthetics in a broad sense, one that transgresses art as such, and for its separation from the anthropology of art. From the 1990s onwards, the increasingly critical stance has emerged, one that has abandoned the examination of the aesthetic as a category of perception in favour of their engagement with the anthropology of art; the perception that the aesthetic is socially specific came to dominate (Marcus and Myers 1995). Focus on social relations thus replaced the earlier focus on aesthetic appreciation. For Marcus and Myers, the aesthetic judgments have to do with ‘social distinction of political substance’ (Marcus and Myers 1995, 7), rather than the sensuous perception. Similarly, in the context of the design industry in India, Kuldova notes that the category of aesthetic was used ‘to mask hierarchies of power’ (Kuldova 2014, 313). Therefore, Marcus and Myers argued for a critical anthropology of art that was to focus primarily on the art worlds in their ‘institutional, discursive and value-producing complexities’ (Marcus and Myers 1995, 5). Pointing to the practices of appropriation, boundaries and circulation of the art in different art worlds (Marcus and Myers 1995, 33-34), reveals the hierarchy between them and the ways in which they are constructed. Instead of thinking of the art world in the singular, one has to keep in mind the plurality of art worlds that exist (Bylder 2004), something that points to the coupling of the art market and hegemonic art worlds, in specific geographies. Being part of an art world today means being exposed to the pressures from the art markets. As McAndrew notes, the art market is ‘a conglomerate of distinct markets’ (McAndrew 2010, 8) consisting of global, national, regional to local markets (Fillitz 2014, 87) being extremely hierarchical and structured (Plattner 1996, 9). Plattner demonstrates such a hierarchical position between art worlds and local art markets by providing an example of a discrepancy between the prices in the local art market in St. Louis where artists rarely sell their works, and for very small prices, and the dominant New York where artworks fetch the highest prices (Plattner 1998). What leads to such a condition of discrepancy, Plattner notes, is ‘the postmodern condition of aesthetics’ which translated into the absence of a dominant theory of good or bad art (Plattner 1998, 491). The abandonment of this approach favouring aesthetic judgement led to the
information asymmetry between the, increasingly authoritative, art dealers, and art buyers (Plattner 1998, 491), thus giving rise to the new system of value production, which was based on prestige creation, while being tied to the price of an artwork, mostly reproduced by the global art world and the global art market.

The global art world, which took its current shape in the 1990s, has been increasingly marked by the exhibition practices of displaying artists from other national art worlds, something that lead to ‘(t)he wider interconnections between art worlds enabled the global art market to apply large-scale, global activities and new strategies’ (Fillitz 2014, 85). These new practices of the global art world reshaped the conditions for artists all over the world and gave primacy to the global art market. The global art market for contemporary art came to consist of complex transnational networks of auction houses, art fairs, and galleries which function on different logics, namely auction houses on the logic of gambling, art fairs on the logic of glamour and galleries on the logic the moral economy (Fillitz 2014). On the basis of the differentiation of these three economic fields, the global art market exploits most efficiently the possibilities of the global art world, being highly flexible in order to rapidly focus on new regions and in this manner attract new clientele (Fillitz 2014, 93). In order to do so, it engages in a diversification of the works of art and adjusts them according to regional demands (Fillitz 2014, 85-86). The main characteristic of the global art market is the fast accumulation of substantial capital, which coincides with financial capitals worldwide, such as New York or London (Fillitz 2014, 84). Therefore, as Fillitz points out, both the global art world and the global art market are ‘neither egalitarian nor reciprocal’ (Fillitz 2014, 85), but are exactly founded on the exclusion and inclusion of the various art worlds, artists and artworks based on the market principle. For example, art fairs create new art trends, just like art biennales paralleling them also in their ‘openness’ to a larger audience, and being a place where only the best art institutions and experts can participate due to their exclusive nature and the artworks which they deem as the best. The value is translated into a price, which is manipulated by auctioneers and gallerists closely linking global art world and the global art market (Fillitz 2014). In the global art market, the context of the price became the sign of its quality.

The disappearance of a dominant critical authority, historically associated with the impressionists’ triumph over the dealer-critic system, led to the construction of the measure of the artist’s significance principally by his or her market success (Plattner 1998, 487). Plattner notes that ‘(i)n the absence of a well-defined set of rules for judging quality, price and how widely the work is distributed are taken as a signal of excellence’ (Plattner 1996:15), which turned the price of the art work into a signifier of its quality.

Prices of artworks serve as a ‘meaningful communication’ mechanism for collectors, art dealers, and artists, who decide based on pricing ‘about issues such as the quality of artworks or the status hierarchies which structure the art world’ (Velthuis 2004: 371). Velthuis notes that pricing difference ‘can be more meaningful than other types of praise or recognition for artists such as reviews by critics and peers, attention from cultural institutions, or compliments by collectors and dealers’ (Velthuis 2004, 380). These practices favour ‘market experience,’ a concept Velthuis borrows from Robert Lane over peer opinion (Lane 2004, 380). Velthuis acknowledges the contested meanings of prices;
prices always need to be interpreted by actors, they have ‘cognitive and cultural meanings’ (Velthuis 2003, 181), meaning that they are specific to a particular hegemonic art world, the global art world. Prices do not only signal the quality constructed by them but they also tell us something about the goods and ‘about the people who make, distribute, and acquire them’ (Velthuis 2004, 383), serving as a prestige building mechanism for art dealers, collectors, gallerists, curators and artists, who are subjected to the deeds of these art world actors. I argue that the protagonists profiting from such a mechanism are the art dealers, auction houses and gallerists, both monetarily and in terms of prestige.

Moreover, prices ‘tell rich stories about the caring role dealers want to enact, about the identity of collectors, about the status of artists, and the artistic value of art. They succeed in twisting and turning prices in different ways to make sense of their economic life’ (2003: 207-208) embedding it in meaning, and in this way producing the value of the art works. The price level not only ranks the artists but also creates the hierarchical position of countries in the international art world, structuring the art world historically and geographically (Velthuis 2003, 201), giving the primacy to the USA, UK and Germany (Fillitz 2014).

Apart from structuring the art world internally, high prices also structure the relationship of the art world to the rest of the society (Velthuis 2003, 202), positioning the high priced artworks as the focus of preservation for the future. The global art market functions like the ‘millennial capitalism’ as Fillitz shows following Comaroffs (2014) since it is set up as ‘a specific organization of diversity that “includes and marginalizes in an unanticipated way” art centers and the respective members of the art world’ (Fillitz 2014, 93). It merges art world and the art market, using to its advantage the neoliberal policies (Fillitz 2014: 93), and inscribes the economic principle of high prices as the index of quality, with the focus on the buyer’s pressuring artists to engage with it. The global art market’s ‘millennial capitalism’ character is also identifiable in its approach to the art academies, which are often neglected in the literature on the art worlds and art markets. The importance of the art academies to the art markets is visible through the recent collecting practices of buying directly from the artists still studying at the academies and from the studios of students since market principle dominates the neoliberal global art world and the global art market. These practices show the double attitude of the market towards the art academies as essential parts of the art worlds.

Firstly, the status of art academies as knowledge creators and talent harbours is used as a guarantee for profit maximization, where the discovery of a young artist still studying is used to build the prestige of the art dealer and art collectors, and the future price increase. For example, the famous brand collector Charles Saatchi informed himself directly in the art academies (Fillitz 2014, 92) in order to always keep discovering new artists; Christina Steinbrecher-Pfandt, the artistic director of viennacontemporary art fair and a collector, noted that in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis the discourse was about the ‘emerging artist’ principally focusing on the art students and that ‘(t)he art academies transformed into galleries and collectors bought art straight off the walls of their exhibitions’ (Collectorsagenda 2017). The artist students are regarded as emerging artists whose future success and prestige translate into that of the collector or the dealer, and are therefore optimal for market success. Velthuis argues that ‘success on the art
market is measured in terms of rising prices rather than rising sales’ (Velthuis 2004, 376), a significant factor used by the art dealers and art collectors in the case of the art students, as their current success ought to guarantee the even more promising future art works. The gallerists taboo decreasing the price of the artworks of an artist, as it the signals their poor expertise and damages their reputations (Velthuis 2003). The difference in the perception of the students and the art academy professors can be tied to the market principles of the global art market, which depends on a constant influx of new and emerging artists to maintain itself. Such a context leads to the perception of the art students as potential new emerging artist on the market on one hand, while on the other hand, the teaching members at these academies and their respective art works are rarely the focus of the global art market or collectors, as they are the acknowledged experts, where the market narrative of discovery is not viable for the art dealers, gallerists and collectors. Their importance and authority are usually fully acknowledged after their death by an exhibition in a renowned museum, an example of such practice is Albertina’s current exhibition of Maria Lassnig’s art works, whereas Albertina has in the past exhibited young artists.

Moreover, critical artworks are being re-appropriated by the neoliberal art markets, translating critical approaches which harness most attention into high market prices, while ignoring the art academies as the institutions which instigate such approaches. ‘The market attributes value first and foremost to the strongest and the famous works, but also to those that trigger discussion by stepping outside the closed field of “Art” and penetrating the public sphere’ (Artprice 2012, 32 in Fillitz 2014, 92). This passage also reflects the way art market re-appropriates the critical discourses to in order to fetch high prices, resulting in the prestige creation for the actors involved. The narratives of visibility, criticality and market success, are tied to the art market pressures on the artists to have their works present in media, a practice quite common since Andy Warhol. The use of media was central to Saatchi’s practices, where he would publish his acquisitions ‘in order to promote the prestige of the artists, but this too enabled him to obtain huge profits by rapidly selling these works on the auction market’ (Fillitz 2014, 92). One of the most important figures of the conceptual art’s emergence and success in New York, the art dealer Seth Siegelaub, has successfully used media to make the movement a success and thus be able to fetch high prices (Alberro 2003). In conceptual art, during the economic boom of the 1960s, Alexander Alberro observes that ‘success came to those who managed and publicized their work most strategically’ (Alberro 2003, 1). For many artists who are not central or part of the hegemonic art worlds being present in media, especially online, means being available to more actors from art worlds and art markets, and being available for discovery. Also, an important aspect is that more new collectors use Internet databases like Artprice, Artnet, Arts Economics (Fillitz 2014, 92), and social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Collectorsagenda 2017) to inform themselves, discover new artists and ‘to connect the economic value of the artwork with its meaning and its status in the art world’ (Fillitz 2014, 92) to close the information asymmetry. That the media coverage is necessary and favourable to art dealers, collectors and exhibitors is not only visible through current uses, historically in the context of the conceptual art in the 1960s New York ‘(a)s the contemporary art scene became a subject of interest in the popular press, the media increasingly gave the purchasers of experimental art some of the same attention they gave the artists’ (Alberro 2003, 7-8). These practices are also visible in art media platforms like Artnews or Art
Bulletin, where stories of collectors and dealers take an equal amount of news space as stories about the artists, and other news, or the new platforms specifically focused on collectors like the Collectorsagenda. The global art market and the global art world practices towards the art academy actors reflect the millennial capitalism’s character and its ability to both include and marginalise in unanticipated ways (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 8; Fillitz 2014, 93). Moreover, critical approaches to artworks, especially those institutionally fostered by the art academies, are being reappropriated by the art market, reflecting the ‘capitalism’s amazing ability to survive by endogenising some of the criticisms it faces’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 163). By turning critical art works into highly priced art works on the global art market, art market also fosters the practice of making critique paradoxical, as, for instance, Jeff Koon’s example demonstrates.

In Vienna’s local art world, the connection to the global art world and art market become visible through the huge price discrepancies between local art markets and the global art market - sales at the level of the Austrian national art market do not usually breach 30 000 euros. In such a context, many artists and galleries have to engage with other actors and other markets, especially the global art market. Fillitz notes that major galleries in Austria work on the transnational collaboration system (Quandt 2008, 88, Fillitz 2014, 89) so they could take part of the global art world and its huge amount of capital. Another pressure on the Art Academies, especially on the Academy of the Applied Arts in Vienna, are the changing contracts which are aligned with neoliberal agendas, and more often decreasing funding by the state. Despite the context of increased neoliberalisation of the arts, artists like Christian Ruschitzka resist and critique the current global art market and the pressures of the global art world by not being present online, and refusing to participate in the art market. Ruschitzka, as an artist teaching at the Academy of the Applied Arts in Vienna, ensures in this manner the income and creates a space to focus on his work, distancing himself from the trends that rule the global art world and the art market. Being in the circle of art experts also means that these are the people who are also able to produce publications about his artworks. Hence, he does not need to be represented by art dealers, gallerists and other actors with different interests which seek to increase their prestige by constructing to their ends the artist’s prestige. Ruschitzka’s artwork *Garden Swing*, by being part of the exhibition, presents the rejection of the current global art market and global art world pressures, instead, pursuing his own exhibition practices.

The emergence of the global art world in the 1990s gave rise to the global art market which with its flexible network came to swiftly accumulate capital and increase the prices of the artworks. This meant that, with the undermining of critical authority, the prices of art works on the global art market came to signify the quality of the artwork, rather than the other way round. High prices also reveal the interests of the art dealers, gallerists, and collectors, as they also signify the hierarchical position of the art worlds and their respective actors. The pressures of the global art market and its millennial capitalism consist of the explanation of different art worlds, use of art academies in a way that includes art students but excludes art professors, and the way it appropriates critique to advance itself. The pressures of the global art market are present in the Viennese local art world, especially notable in the price differences between the local art market and the global art market. While the critical artworks became included in the global art market as prestigious works, artists like Ruschitzka show that truly critical
practices are possible. The analysis of critical practices in different art worlds as well the role of the art academies vis-à-vis the global art market and the global art world show that the global art world and the global art market significantly mimic neoliberalism, in its imperative of the market principle, in the construction of the value of an artwork through prices and through practices which it instigates in the artists that are oriented at the global art market. The role of the global art world and the global art market in neoliberalism is to be further analysed and might yield interesting new relations between the two.


