

THE UNDERLYING TERM IS DEMOCRACY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIAN  
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I. ART AS A COMMODITY

**Vid Simoniti:** In *Art Incorporated*,<sup>1</sup> you seek to debunk the myth of the artworld as autonomous of the market forces of global capitalism. Instead, you argue, works of art have become yet another commodity. However, one could say that works of art have always been commodities as well as objects of aesthetic appreciation. What makes the problem pertinent now, in the age of artists like Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst?

**Julian Stallabrass:** As you say, artworks have been commodities for a very long time and certainly they have been unequivocal commodities from the time of bourgeois autonomy in art, when people started to make art outside of the direct patronage of the state and church. This development goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. And I'm not sure that it's accurate to say that a painting of that period was more commodified or less commodified than a painting is now.

I guess what I was more interested in *Art Incorporated* was the ideal of free art, which seems to have been compromised in various ways. This ideal has a powerful ideological component but is not merely an illusion, as artists continue to have much

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<sup>1</sup> Stallabrass (2004).

more freedom than most people in working situations, and we have some freedom as viewers in looking at art in museums, in confronting these objects in less instrumental ways than we deal with most objects in, say, our working lives. But that freedom does tend to be compromised in various ways. It is compromised by museum agendas: the museum itself is becoming, certainly in the neoliberal state, a much more branded, commercially driven organisation, and I think that changes the likely meanings that people give the works within it. It is challenged by the state agendas which are trying to bend art to be socially useful in various ways. And probably above all by corporate interests: owning and collecting art, displaying art for employees and visitors, and especially in sponsoring art exhibitions, and pursuing very particular agendas as they do that. This means that it is much easier to get certain exhibition seen than others.

The other point is that art and business have become much closer together in terms of their respective ethos. As Boltanski and Chiapello outlined in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*,<sup>2</sup> one of the responses to the events of 1968 was in some ways to make business artistic. So, in that sense the realm of freedom has been made less distinct.

**VS:** So, what is pertinent about the criticism of art as commodity now, as opposed to before, is that on one hand we have art that poses as free, and draws its credentials from that pose. On the other hand we have business mimicking that freedom. But they are both only using that freedom merely as a form to further their own commercial agendas and make them marketable. It's this kind of hypocrisy which is at fault.

**JS:** And sometimes, and especially as we saw in the years of the art market bubble, the artworld is entirely open about that; that is interesting too. There were occasions when artworld people would be a bit reticent about prices, and about the business of art. But now you have someone like Koons or Hirst among the most successful artists in the world who have become successful precisely by making art about the monetary value of the things that they make. There's a transparency there which suggests that that ideological proximity of money and art is no longer felt to be very uncomfortable.

**VS:** You don't buy the ironic twist interpretation, I suppose? Damien Hirst sells *The Golden Calf* to the Russian tycoons, and he's making a point in this way?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello (2007).

<sup>3</sup> *The Golden Calf* (2008), consisting of a calf with gold-plated hooves and horns in formaldehyde, was sold at Sotheby's for £10.3 million as part of Hirst's *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* auction. The auction raised £111 million in total.

**JS:** Art has long made meta-statements about itself , at least since the days of conceptualism, the days of Duchamp really. So you can always flip these objects into such an interpretation if you want, and it's a very easy move to make. Certainly this is also Warhol's whole metier. But it's a powerless critique which is also enacting and enjoying the thing it is critiquing.

**VS:** Have there been any counter-trends emerging to the model of art as a commodity in the last six years, since *Art Incorporated* was published?

**JS:** The documentary strain in contemporary art, particularly in photography and video, has been going from strength to strength. That produced some weird splits in the artworld, especially before 2008 when you had the extraordinary boom, which turned out to be a bubble, in contemporary art prices. At one end, you had many artists who were serving the market and spectacle in a very overt, quite cynical way, producing big showy pieces to decorate the boardrooms with. But at the same time you had a lot of politically inflected, serious documentary work, particularly in video, which was very successful on the biennial scene, was seen in alternative spaces and in some museums, but had a more doubtful marketability. Work by Omer Fast, for instance or Hito Steyerl, or performance work, like Regina José Galindo's, among many others. There was also the revival of older reputations, of people who – like Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler – had earlier careers and who worked through a period in which the documentary was denigrated in the art world.

These artists were picked up and became regular features on the biennial scene, particularly Sekula. As a result, you had the weird situation of split biennials showing both types of work—marketable spectacle and the political documentary. This was particularly striking at Documenta XII and at Robert Storr's Venice Biennale that same year, 2007. The formalist, aesthetic and spectacular objects were pushed up against sometimes rebarbative political works without any sense of mediation. These biennials were seen as almost schizophrenic. The Documenta, in particular, was being described as a truly bewildering experience by viewers who couldn't make sense of these combinations at all.

**VS:** Let us return to what you mentioned earlier: the way that the business-savvy model of art institutions can change the meaning of the works within them. At one of your talks, I remember, you gave the example of the reception of Doris Salcedo's

*Shibboleth* at the Turbine Hall<sup>4</sup> – a work with a clear political message, which was perceived by the audiences as something fun to jump over. Could you say a bit more about that? Are you saying this is a feature of some institutions now or are you saying something stronger, that no political work can be effectively shown within mainstream art institutions anymore?

**JS:** What actually happened with Salcedo's Turbine Hall work had partly to do with the branded environment of the Tate. The Tate now is taken to be a place for a kind of intellectual entertainment, particularly the Turbine Hall. You have had a series of rather entertaining fairground works in there, and I think that built up the public's expectations that the Salcedo would be another one. I'm sure there were people who cared about the interpretation and thought about it more deeply, but the atmosphere around that work seemed strangely inappropriate to its general tenor.

However, one can imagine a serious Salcedo show at the Tate. It's not beyond the bounds of possibility. They have made some striking interventions. One thing that stood out for me was Mark Wallinger's *State Britain*.<sup>5</sup> Wallinger exhibited the protest displays by Brian Haw – the mass of placards and photographs, with which Haw had been protesting for many years outside Westminster against sanctions and the war against Iraq. The police took these down by court order, and Wallinger reconstructed the entire set in the Duveen Gallery at Tate Britain. He also made a point that this was within a mile of Westminster, the exclusion zone for such unauthorised displays; he put a line on the floor showing that. It was technically an illegal show. This was done in the dying months of Blair's prime-ministership; nevertheless, it was brave and overtly political statement. And I think that it worked very well, especially the contrast between the grand galleries and the institution itself, and these very strident and poisonous objects within them.

So I'm not saying this can never work, and a place like the Tate can never do it. On the other hand, for a big Salcedo show, for example, it would be quite difficult for them to raise money for the reasons we discussed to do with corporate agendas.

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<sup>4</sup> *Shibboleth* (2007) was a temporary installation at the Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, consisting of a crack running along the floor of the entire hall. Salcedo interpreted the work as thematically engaging with the experience of immigrants, xenophobia and segregation.

<sup>5</sup> *State Britain* (2007), a temporary installation at Tate Britain. Wallinger won the 2007 Turner Prize for the work.

**VS:** Despite what you said about Documenta XII and the Venice Biennale, can the biennial be the institution where political work can happen free from such influences?

**JS:** Certainly, and that has been the complaint of many conservatives about it: that they go and see the same kinds of openly political work over and over again. However, there's a question pertaining especially to large biennials about the curatorial coherence and what this collation of works amounts to: whether it is merely an amalgamation of the curatorial team's tastes or whether it has an argument running through it. I did a small biennial myself a couple of years ago [The Brighton Photo Biennial, 2008], and tried to make it as clear and cogent in arguments as I could. It was a reaction against these rather baggy, portmanteau biennials, which have themes in which you would appear to be able to stuff more or less anything.

## II. THEORY AND ART

**VS:** How do you see art and philosophy interacting in the last ten years or so?

**JS:** There is some institutionalisation of theory within the artworld. If you look at the biennial literature and serious literature about artists, philosophical theories are very regularly invoked. Philosophers are often invited to comment on various bodies of work. In that sense, it's a symbiotic relationship.

**VS:** Do you see certain theories as more in allegiance with certain trends?

**JS:** If I look at the documentary strand that I mentioned earlier, Rancière is one of the key figures in cultivating that line and reflecting on it. Badiou is often invoked in talking about acts of political will against the current situation; there's Guattari as well. Looking at it a little bit cynically, I think that the philosophers who often get invoked are those who are very flattering about art. They have extremely nice things to say about it. They think it has a potentially very powerful effect on the way that the society works and operates. For Badiou it is one of those things, alongside love, scientific discovery and political action, which can stand outside – completely outside – the everyday world. Lyotard, Deleuze, Kristeva – all of these people expect of art an enormous amount. And one might say that some of these categories of human endeavour are thereby put into a mystical box which lies outside the normal tracks of discourse. That's convenient for the artworld, I think. It goes back to something that Pierre Bourdieu wrote about in *The Rules of Art*<sup>6</sup> a long time ago, where he asks why

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu (1996); original French edition: 1992.

it should be that this realm of human activity, art, is taken to be entirely beyond our ordinary powers of analysis. It is a telling question.

**VS:** The theoretical machine around it doesn't help explain it; it rather helps mystify it.

**JS:** Or may do. It's not true of all of it by any means. Hardt and Negri, for example, are also quite popular theorists within the artworld, but I think their writing has a different character.

### III. POLITICAL ART

**VS:** One thing some of these theoreticians extol is the effectiveness of art with regards to the political situation. You seem to be sceptical about that?

**JS:** I am not entirely sceptical about it by any means. It is a much preferable situation that we have a flourishing biennial scene where many more artists from many more places are having their work seen. The issues that are being raised come from all over the world, the counter-trends we've been talking about are regularly shown, and all these are positive developments. I don't want to dismiss them at all.

But I do think that the artworld has some difficulties in building a relationship with serious politics, particularly collective politics, and politics which has any measurable effect.

To take an example from Internet art, there was the etoy campaign, which was partly a gestural and symbolic action that was a propaganda campaign against the toy company that had attacked the art site, but it was also an attack on eToys servers.<sup>7</sup> This was very effective, depressing the share price down by 75%. By then a number of critics said that this could no longer be taken as an artwork, since it has a use: it is a functioning political campaign. So there has been an attempt to push anything useful out of the artworld.

And also there's the constitutional individualism about the artworld, which is fixed only on individual players. The task of the artist is seen as making a niche for

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<sup>7</sup> *Toywar* (1999) was a tactical media event, arising out of the legal dispute between the etoy art collective and the eToys, an online toys retailer. The business successfully sued the art collective for its domain name, despite appearing online at a later date. In response, several key players of Internet art banded together to create an online computer game-like platform, from which users could sabotage eToys' servers during the Christmas period, disrupting sales. The interruptions and negative publicity eventually forced eToys into bankruptcy.

themselves, distinct from all others. Well, when you think about the ethos of that and the ethos of collective action, you can see that the two have incompatibilities.

**VS:** Couldn't someone say: why not just have political action simpliciter? Who needs Internet art when we have WikiLeaks, which doesn't claim in any way to be an artwork?

**JS:** In a sense you are asking whether a political movement needs a cultural element or an art to it. And the answer to that is surely yes. These things can be in certain circumstances tremendously powerful. I think the hesitation partly comes in thinking about how much are political artists confined to the artworld. Certainly it is useful to operate there. The artworld is not closed off from the rest of the world. But if that's all that you do, then there are questions to be asked.

There are productive political and cultural combination that are found in the protest movements. There was a wonderful example of that in one of the Reclaim the Streets [1996] protests on the Westway in London where activists with huge hoop skirts on stilts sort were wandering about the closed down motorway.<sup>8</sup> A huge sound system was playing, so it was very difficult to hear what was going on underneath the skirts. And what was going on was that they were digging up the road with drills and planting trees. That's a work of performance art, and a piece of politics; there's a merging going on there.

**VS:** So, if there is going to be an art which is going to accompany a political movement, it would betray it if it were just an aesthetic add-on, but it also can't be purely the movement itself. It needs to straddle that divide.

**JS:** There's a nice example in recent student protests [against education cuts, 2010]. There are some students from here [the Courtauld] who made enormous books, which they wrapped around their bodies. Obviously these are symbols of the attack on the education system, but also shields against police brutality.

**VS:** Internet art leads us to the question of the role played by mass culture. Benjamin, who is among your influences, was enthusiastic about the emancipatory possibilities

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<sup>8</sup> Reclaim The Streets are a collective and resistance movement, opposing the corporate interests in globalisation and car use.

of mass culture, but in your book *Gargantua*<sup>9</sup> you seem to say this project has failed. Does anything remain of Benjamin's idea?

**JS:** The Benjamin essay that most comes to mind for me these days is 'The Author as Producer.' There, Benjamin is setting a very high bar for political art, one which little political art is able to meet. The question is to what extent the art is able to undermine the distinction between the author or the reader or the artist and the viewer, that is, to what extent does it empower the viewers to make things themselves? Internet art certainly did that. It was highly participatory in that sense, and there was a continual borrowing of other people's work going on, a great deal of very fast comment, and there was a community of support and political comment there, which was very sustaining.

However, I was recently talking to David Garcia – he is one of the theorists of tactical media – and he made a very interesting remark, which is to say that he looks at Web 2.0 and what they've done is to marketize the sorts of tools that activists were making ten years ago. We are now uniquely and in very novel ways faced with an extraordinary level of self-publishing and self-producing of cultural artefacts, which can be shared across the Net. And, while there are highly marketized, uniform and indeed kind of idiotic aspects of all that, at the same time that is a technological empowerment for many, many people, and one which hands artists extraordinary opportunities to meet Benjamin's difficult challenge.

**VS:** Web 2.0 creates a more level playing field for grass-roots artistic and political action.

**JS:** Quite right. For example, the recent student protests have been making use of these possibilities to great effect.

**VS:** If we return to political art, specifically: do you think that overtly political works can ever become too overt – is there a danger of them becoming too didactic? Alfredo Jaar is a political artist, for example, who seems mindful of keeping an aesthetic component.

**JS:** It is certainly true that the artworld has a problem with didactic politics in works, and I think that is something that many artists find ways of steering around. They are worried about their art being dismissed as mere propaganda or seen as part of the

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<sup>9</sup> Stallabrax (1996).

instrumental world rather than part of the autonomous artworld. There are many ways of doing that, and some of them are in themselves quite didactic.

But there are examples where aesthetics and the didactic can work together. For example, if you look at Omer Fast's very complex video installations, they are very much about the rhetoric of politics, the rhetoric of film making or video making, about what it means to sit someone down in front of a camera and make them offer a witness statement of how you stage a scene. So, there's a way in which the aesthetics of those works and their didactic character come together very effectively. They get people to think about all of those things in a way that you probably don't think about them when you sit in front of the TV.

So, there remains something curiously Brechtian about video art, which I think goes right back to its origins. It is consistently referring to itself and to its own techniques and methods and getting viewers to stand back from the spectacle that it offers. And although the character of video art has changed enormously, certainly in terms of video projections and high definition and slick production values, that current still remains strong. And Jaar is another great example where aesthetics and political effect, and certainly a kind of didacticism work together. I think the opposition between the two comes out of a lazy conservative thinking.

**VS:** Still, I find it hard to think how beauty fits in. Someone like Olafur Eliasson comes to mind – it's beautiful, corporations like it and yet he's supposedly making an environmental point. It seems that precisely because of its beauty it comes across as phony, and so one might think that beauty is necessarily the enemy of politically engaged art.

**JS:** It's a difficult question. There was obviously a propaganda campaign launched for beauty in the early 1990s by Dave Hickey and various others, which was pretty successful. There was a certain appeal to people saying 'why is the art surrounding us so rebarbative? Let's make some pretty things'. It seems to me that contemporary art relies on, and has for some time, a set of connected affects it might have over the viewer. The sublime would be one of them; the abject would be another; beauty would be another. They are all supposed to bear on deeply subjective areas of the psyche, and ones which surpass language and rational calculation. I wouldn't see any of them as being the enemy necessarily; I think it has to do to what purpose they are being turned towards.

Take the work of someone like Bill Viola. Here you have a very major, charismatic artist who does very polished, beautiful, traditional video work. And the intent, I think, is in part to overawe the viewer, which is one reason why it is liked by the institutions, like museums, who want to do that, first and foremost.

But it makes us come back to the issue we were talking about earlier, about individualism and collective action. Do we want a culture, which is an authoritarian one, which is saying: here are the charismatic and exceptional individuals that you should worship; they are shown within institutions, which are full of experts who know exactly what they are doing and they will interpret the work for you, and show it in a respectful way, so that it is not violated. The work must be handled carefully; you, the public, are not allowed to interfere with it. Do you want that kind of culture or the culture which seems to be offered to us by technologies like Web 2.0, which is more ephemeral, more participatory, more dialogic, and is about opening up this cultural sphere?

**VS:** So political art, and political Internet art, is not to be valued only as a means to an end, as something that will bring about a positive transformation of the political and economic relations in the society?

**JS:** Not necessarily. They may do that; one might hope that they do that. But I think that the underlying term on which pressure can be applied here is 'democracy'. We insist on it in the West; our political systems are apparently built on it; we send our armies to defend it. But what does it mean when we think about the kind of power we have in our everyday lives, including the power we have over our culture? In fact, we are granted very little power and are faced with a powerful engine of infantilising cultural consumption. So we should welcome anything that gets people talking and thinking outside of that culture.

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:**

Julian Stallabrass is a Professor in Art History at the Courtauld Institute. He is also an art critic, curator and photographer. He is the author of several books: *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (Verso, 1996), *High Art Lite: British art in the 1990s* (Verso, 1999), *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (Tate Gallery Publishing, 2003), *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford University Press, 2004). He writes art criticism for publications including *Tate*, *Photoworks*, *Art Monthly*, and the *New Statesman*. He curated an exhibition at Tate Britain entitled 'Art and Money Online' (2001), and the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial. He is an editorial board member of *Art History*, *New Left Review* and *Third Text* and on the advisory board of *Visual Culture in Britain*. His photography has been exhibited and published internationally.

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER:**

Vid Simoniti is the editor of *The Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*. He is studying for a Bachelor of Philosophy degree at the University of Oxford. His thesis is on whether there are specifically literary ways of addressing philosophical problems.

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