Commodification—The People versus The Corporate Cool Machine

By the way if anyone here is in advertising or marketing... kill yourself. No, no, no it’s just a little thought. I’m just trying to plant seeds. Maybe one day, they’ll take root—I don’t know. You try, you do what you can. Kill yourself. Seriously though, if you are, do. Aaah, no really, there’s no rationalisation for what you do and you are Satan’s little helpers. Okay—kill yourself—seriously. You are the ruiner of all things good, seriously. No this is not a joke, you’re going, “there’s going to be a joke coming,” there’s no fucking joke coming. You are Satan’s spawn filling the world with bile and garbage. You are fucked and you are fucking us. Kill yourself. It’s the only way to save your fucking soul, kill yourself.

—Bill Hicks

Our question here is was Bill Hicks right? Or should artists embrace marketing and commodification?

There is something of a cannibal culture in art: artists feel they can appropriate (that means steal) any one else’s work, call it inspiration and of course sell it; but yet we hear people complaining about the commodification of art—and loud complaints about how dealers and all those involved in the filthy lucre side of things are parasites and criminals. The term ‘consumer culture’ arose to refer to the dominance of a mode of consumption that was structured by the collective actions of big companies and their marketing activities. It is related to Horkheimer and Adorno’s term (from the 1940s) the ‘culture industries.’ Again this related to the system of mass cultural production, and the techniques for rationalising culture as a commodity: culture as commerce. For Horkheimer and Adorno this was a kind of ideological glue that maintained a broad consensual participation in capitalist society and helped to prevent its overthrow by creating a false consciousness of our reality. It’s like art is the commodity that sells all the other commodities. How should we understand this as artists—can it be escaped?

With the commodification of art we devour others’ lives including the signs of their lives: things, ideas, and images and the illusions they provide. Our will to power, is the will to consume: an ineluctable will to contain and control. Commodification is an invitation to be like Edward Said’s Orientalists: colonial conquerors and collectors who never questioned their appetites or whether they were entitled to objects, knowledge, or territory. They reinvented the cultures they appropriated in their own image, or some desired exotic image. Advertisers and marketing does this too: they sell dreams. Eventually the Orientalist’s plunder is assembled in the big National Museums and repackaged so that we can cling to the fantasies of power: to demonstrate colonized lives specimens are provided and explained to us—’Red Indians’ and so on. If we begin to question the process of commodification of culture we can start at the creation of national identity. The Nation is the brand par excellence it provides instruction for how to perform the collective good life; it too acts as the social glue that helps to bring together neighbourhoods of strangers (or remove or censor some of them).
Museums are political: they can validate social claims and legitimise relations of power, but they can also be agents of social change. If we change the institutions of society we change society. Museums and other spectacles are purveyors of ideology: the downward spread of ‘knowledge’ to the public, and as such they contribute to and sell historical processes which are part of the efforts of nation states to unite their population (or for the big business that funded the show to gain our approval). We can characterise this pedagogy, this ideology of visual culture as the Spectacle of visual culture—images arranged and presented to teach us what and how to see, and in the end, how to think. These types of Spectacle attempt to mediate how we interact as social beings, but on another level they also reveal who runs society—the people behind the spectacle who manufacture our consent and suspend our disbelief.

The present cultural structuring of consumption aims to maintain political support for the free market system (actually a monopoly and cartelization process), the expansion of markets, and unlimited increase in industry profits—the centralisation of wealth in fewer hands: neo-liberalism.

We are immersed in (glued to) visual culture almost to the point where we stop thinking about it, but to try to understand its impact on social relations we should attempt to differentiate between corporate, institutionalised expressions of subjectivity (such as in marketing strategies), and compare personal expressions of subjectivity through the making of art. Are they different or are they the same? Have the marketing people won—has everything got a dollar sign on it in the way Hicks insists? The commodification of art is one way to investigate all this. The critique of all this can just be a narcissistic fixation with the dominant order of visual culture, but I think we should challenge this commodity fetishism and develop a less impersonal perspective. Collage, montage, assemblage, installation, and performance art have all tried to critique the spectacle of visual culture, and I would stress the work of two theorists here, first Christopher Lasch who said:

In a society dominated by the production and consumption of images, no part of life can remain immune from the invasion of spectacle. (Lasch, 1991: 122)

And secondly, Guy Debord who said:

The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. (Debord, 1967: 151)
enslavement and negation of real life. (Debord, 1967: 151)

For Debord this spectacle is not a collection of images: it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. An image is not simply negative or positive: it is the product of social relations: it produces contradictory social effects whereby we are conditioned with our choices hemmed in as we internalise the spectacle. Most of us could probably join in with advertising songs in the unlikely event someone was to start singing one. People who have internalised consumer culture implicitly grant big business the authority to organise their taste.

According to Herbert Marcuse (writing in 1972) because of all this we become one-dimensional, we cease to be critical: we are ‘dumbed down’ and our thoughts are populated by hypnotic definitions that dictate we follow the monopoly of mass-mediated culture and the insidious efforts of corporate capitalism to manufacture our desires. Marketing is largely successful in channelling consumer desires through brands. It is a totalitarian system.

But all these writers call for a more democratic form of practice that is a critical examination of the codes of this visual cultural imperialism and move towards some form of social justice that sees through the propaganda. If we think that art has been swallowed up in all this forever; that is a metaphysical pathos: a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many people willingly work in the ‘belly of the beast,’ to work from within for change from within (no need for the terms hypocrisy or sycophancy here) others are seduced and compromised, others notice nothing or are happy being wild animals in a zoo. Meanwhile people like Peter Brabeck-Letmathe of Nestlé argue that all water should be privatised as a commodity and that access to it was “not a public right.” Others think we should wean ourselves off this addiction and that part of this is waking up from the illusion of a true dominant culture and start working towards something different while we still have a breathable air, food and water. Possibly from the ruins of the old consumer culture we will build a new one with a non-commercial heart and soul… “going for the righteous indignation dollar. That’s a big dollar.”

Lasch wrote on a new cognitive elite that comprised of ‘symbolic analysts’— lawyers, academics, journalists, systems analysts, brokers, bankers, who were professionals trafficking in information who manipulate words and numbers for a living. They live in an abstract world in which information and expertise are the most valuable commodities. Lasch attached this to the collapse of religion and: “its replacement by the remorselessly critical sensibility exemplified by psychoanalysis, and the degeneration of the ‘analytic attitude’ into an all-out assault on ideals of every kind.” This is an extension of J. K. Galbraith’s idea of the affluent society: Galbraith coined the phrase ‘private affluence and public squalor’ to contrast the superior quality of privately owned resources with the squalor of under-funded public resources. Just as TV advertising was beaming out its cheerful message about cigarettes to burgeoning US suburbs Galbraith’s work also captured the public’s imagination. His idea was that the new branding and advertising techniques tried to fool people into buying into superfluous desires, to follow the pursuit of material well-being far beyond what was necessary. Several writers of the time put forward the idea (sometimes in science fiction) that corporations were programming the minds of consumers (a trendy computing...
corporations were programming the minds of consumers (a trendy computing metaphor) and this coalesced into an attack on the deadening conformity of the homogeneous culture offered by marketers.

The present awareness of the levels of surveillance and how this works through social media is something that these writers anticipated. This pseudo-personalisation would have annoyed Debord, he wrote his book: “with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society.” Most of us are bought off by the wonderful things capitalism provides: sadly Debord never lived to appear on ‘Big Brother’ “to get his message across to people he might not reach” as the politicians who go on these things tend to say—somehow they just cannot say: “I’m doing this for the money and to demonstrate that I can be bribed.” And here lies the problem—we can be all pure here, but how do you make money and manage to carry on making art?

Artists are brands—or rather the lucky ones are—the rest of us are left on the shelf. The first principle of the culture of capitalism—the US one in particular— is the primacy of the individual: an atomised essentialist psychic monad: a unit. Although brands like Nike, Coke, McDonald’s, Microsoft and Starbucks are under attack by a re-awakening of the counter-culture, branding has provided them with a modern cultural engineering paradigm, premised upon a consumer culture that grants marketers a cultural authority that reforms itself and assimilates and disguises. Dealers, Critics and uber-wealthy Collectors think like this with what they refer to as art. The present situation of people who are well-known for being well-known is premised upon the pursuit of personal sovereignty through brands (we are our own little nations).

Drawing on Holt (2002) we can say that there are four branding techniques that are premised upon the principle that brands are authentic cultural resources.

Holt thinks that the contradictions this has engendered will give rise to a new post-postmodern branding paradigm premised upon brands as ‘citizen-artists.’ Debord’s ‘Society of the Spectacle’ has been accomplished in high tech form by Google Glass—hackable incidentally. Big business has read Naomi Klein’s (1999) No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies and observed the attempts to bring together a global anti-branding movement that links firms’ branding efforts to environmental issues, human rights or cultural degradation and unchecked globalization—and it mimics and attempts to capture these debates: if you buy a can of whatever some money goes to something and we can all ignore the reality.

The technologies of marketing—market research, segmentation, targeting, mass advertising—lead to a channelling of culture that erases idiosyncrasies including resistance. It produces conformity of style, marginalizes risk taking and closes down interpretation. I want the McDonald’s burger and the Coke I’ve bought to be the same as the last one and I do not want to even have to think about that—and it is the same with art dealers. But I also might want to block out some of the effects of the market via a more reflexive resistance that filters out marketing’s influence. It may be that after watching thousands of TV adverts I’ve found that marketing is a form of distorted communication, that the marketers control the information that is exchanged. Yes those
celebrity actors pretending to like that stuff that tastes like cat food and toilet-cleaner are actors, and somehow I cannot interrupt them although they are talking to me.

According to Holt one of the first branding gurus, Earnest Elmo Calkins, developed the idea that manufacturers should position their brands as concrete expressions of valued social and moral ideals. His new style was to propose that products materially embodied people’s ideals: advertisements would mess with our aspirations, particularly concerning our families, our place in society, our masculinity and femininity. These ads seem a bit didactic now—dominated by the butch voice over—‘the mark of a man’—but they lessened the link to a functional benefit: they embodied psychological and social properties that constituted the good life. A complete pretence that tells us how we should live and what will be the central part of it: the product!

As marketing has become more sophisticated branding moved away from prescribing tastes in a domineering overly coercive style. Mimicking the counter-culture, people would be encouraged to experience consumption as where you engage in personal development, achievement and self-creation. The self was a work still under construction: authenticity was premised upon making thoughtful life-governing choices rather than obeying market dictates. And here is where art and culture come in: modern consumer culture emphasises that to be socially valued cultural content must pass through branded goods. Meanings must be channelled through brands to have value so that consumers could express status. Consumers would now form communities around brands, they claim to be doing their own thing while doing it with thousands of like-minded others. Consumer culture becomes a popular, widely dispersed form of self-control in which market power produces the freedom to construct oneself according to any imaginable design available thorough commodities. Brands are cultural resources, the ingredients of the soul.

Four techniques create the perception that brands provided consumers with original cultural resources—somehow not connected to an economic agenda:

1. Ironic, Reflexive Brand Persona.
2. Coat-tailing on Cultural Epicenters.
3. Life World Emplacement.

I'll explain these and look at the contradictions that they engender still drawing on Holt.

1. Ironic, Reflexive Brand Persona: Levi’s “501 Blues,” Nike’s “Just Do It,” Duracell’s “Energizer Bunny” and Volkswagen’s “Think Small” all used irony and reflexivity to distance their brands from the over-hype of conventional advertising. The problem with this is the law of diminishing returns. Some brands could cleverly mock advertising conventions, but when dozens do it, then ironic distancing from commerce just becomes commerce. Like the Energiser Bunny they do not really last.

2. Coat-tailing on Cultural Epicenters: These epicenters include the arts and fashion worlds; ethnic subcultures; professional communities and consumption communities (snowboarders, bikers etc.) the idea here is the brand forges a credible relationship to create the impression that the brand is a vested member of the community and that its stature within that community is deserved. They are part of things (rather than mere cultural parasites). This area should concern us as artists: when big business pursues
this model it monopolises these channels of cultural creation as a central strategy. Large consumer goods companies and ad agencies have moved aggressively to develop their ability to manage the market for cultural properties: Asda Art awaits.

Here the anti-branding movement has demanded that corporations cannot simply act as ventriloquists and should reveal their corporate bodies to public scrutiny. A growing number of people are aware of the contradictions between what the brands say about their ideals and the real world activities of the corporations who profit from a cute talking chocolate bar. We do not just want to watch the show, we’d like to walk back stage to establish whether the character is consistent or a charade. Thanks to pressure groups Nike has found it necessary to move toward becoming a transparent company (a real victory).

(3) Life World Emplacement. This uses the idea that authentic culture is a product not of cultural specialists but of the street. The ad is just a lens: the brand’s value emanates from disinterested everyday life situations far removed from commercial sponsorship. The hand-held shaky camera is a fly on the wall that somehow just managed to capture a rapper talking about the benefits of Diet Coke to ‘ordinary people’ on the Basketball Court in the ghetto; why surely marketing influence cannot be a factor because these people are too opinionated and savvy to fall for such stuff! These can also hark back to a more authentic past: Jack Daniels or Harley Davidson ties itself to outlaw bikers to convince mainstream consumers that Harley proudly upholds the macho moral codes of the outlaws. Increasingly these are accompanied by events.

(4) Stealth Branding: Instead of direct branding efforts, business will find and gain the allegiance of tastemakers who use their influence to diffuse the idea that the firm’s brand has cultural value (that it is cool). This also uses a grass roots, viral, tribal and a buzz kind of language—‘Lilly Allen was just a nobody toiling away unrecognised, a true artist…’ It is old-fashioned product placement. Bruce Willis lights up a Lucky Strike in ‘Die Hard’, Samuel L. Jackson enjoys a Big Kahoona Burger etc., but it doesn’t have to be stars—anyone deemed to have social influence (hipster barflies, gang members, sociable people and their beautiful friends). The problem here is that you are entirely avoiding direct contact. I must believe that Bono has no such mission. Lately
For years Guy Debord’s Situationists and Adbusters encouraged people to culture jam ads, changing the words and images to subvert the intended message: detournment. Anyone who has mastered the basics of Photoshop can now do it on Twitter and Facebook. Contemporary marketing (get involved!) requires an ever-expanding supply of fashions, cultural texts, tourist experiences, cuisines, mass cultural icons, and as a result widespread inflation in the symbolic work is required, so we rely on “infomediaries” — what book should I read? I know I’ll ask Opera Winfrey. So will brands become another form of expressive culture indistinguishable from art?

Marx makes a distinction between use value and exchange value — this is whether I produce something as a product (to make) or as a commodity (to sell). Art becomes another type of alienated labour when it is reduced to commodity status. For Marx a commodity appears at first sight a trivial thing easily understood. But on analysis, in reality it is a very odd thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. If we view artists as engaging in free expression, then they have autonomy over what they produce — they intellectually and physically own what they make. When the process of commodification enters, commercial pressures are exerted not just on creativity and style: they have a sinister effect in the context of the moral worth and integrity of art, where creative expression seeks to ask questions of the dominant culture; or with art that seeks to engage politically in conveying real freedom. Art becomes part of what Marx termed the ‘commodity fetishism’ inherent in capitalism. Obviously any Art object is not exchangeable for any other one like other commodities, but art works are part of a market economy — whatever intangible values they may be said to have (whatever political or moral point they make or attack) their ‘uniqueness’ also becomes part of this.

Benjamin’s theory of aura, in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’ highlighted this uniqueness and authenticity of art in contrast to photo-reproduction technologies: this is where he moved into a more subtle and complex analysis concerning the commodification of images and not objects. Whereas Marxists, like Benjamin wanted artists and intellectuals to be an avant-garde, to provide the reconnaissance that might lead the masses out of what Georg Lukács called an ideological false consciousness, by the mid-1970s former French Marxists (mostly Maoist) rejected Marxism and became postmodernists: (helped by the Cold War) they shifted over to attack the left and embrace the market with the pseudo-intellectualism of post modernism. This fashionable nonsense was ideal for art. In 1996, Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont submitted an essay called ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’ to Social Text, an academic journal of postmodern cultural studies. This was to investigate whether:

A leading North American journal of cultural studies — whose editorial collective includes such luminaries as Fredric Jameson and Andrew Ross — would publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good.
would publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions.

It was published and Sokal & Bricmont revealed it was a hoax much to the annoyance of the postmodernists. Indeed now we have the Postmodernist generator to produce similar nonsense. While Adorno (in ‘Aesthetic Theory’) and Horkheimer saw the modern capitalist ‘culture industry’ as providing mass illusions: “enlightenment as mass deception,” the postmodern variety of neo-Marxian interpretations that are used to promote art offered a very different apolitical academic and obscurantist discourse, that maintains an ironic detachment from the real world of actual economics, social and foreign policy and its connection to the business of the arts market and art world.

Part of this mass delusion is evident in the mild amusement art now gives us: Adorno and Horkheimer believed that mass art (what we would think of as popular culture) was based on 'a medicinal bath' of amusement and laughter, rather than on any transcendent experience or genuine happiness. Like Diderot they felt a great perversion had taken place: people were amused and liberated from the need to think and their laughter affirmed existing society. Art is historically-specific: it changes its structure depending upon the prevailing economic system it exists under.

So is art a commodity? Well what Marx meant by commodity fetishism was not related to sexual fetishes: it related to how an inanimate object, commodities in this case, were worshipped for their supposed magical powers or because they were inhabited by a spirit: or 'made by art' (meaning sorcery). We are 'reified'—fatally estranged—our consciousness of the social relations of production falsely perceives it not as relationships among people, but as economic relationships among the money and commodities exchanged in market trade. The subjective, abstract aspects of economic value are turned into objective, and become real things that people believe have intrinsic value (west African fetishes were also a big influence on Picasso as the French empire brought them home). Here's what Marx said:

…the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx, 1990: 165.)

This drew on early psychological interpretation of religion that were considered dangerously subversive. This process of commodity fetishism, the socio-economic reification of a commodity into a fetish with 'intrinsic' value has five key stages according to Marx:

(1) The domination of things—we adjust our belief in the intrinsic value of a thing in relation to its price (market value). This psychological perception transforms the trading-value of a commodity into an independent entity: the social value of what we are selling appears to be a natural property of the commodity. "The markets have a life of their own" so we cease to see the social interaction among capitalists—where commodities are bought and sold—as the true driver of the market. We can see the relevance to art here and also to Debord's idea that the spectacle transforms human relations into objectified relations among images, and vice versa.

(2) Objectified value—We ascribe subjective values to the commodities: the buyers and sellers perceive these as objective values, the market-exchange prices that people will pay. Thus commodity value originates from our intellectual and perceptual capacity to
Thus commodity value originates from our intellectual and perceptual capacity to consciously ascribe a relative value to a commodity. The obvious corollary with art here is the forgery: I pay for a van Gogh, it turns out not to be by him, I want my money back even although I was convinced that I had obtained a valuable work. Rich people are concerned with social status (prestige) and to avoid status anxiety (not belonging to "the right social class") they establish a personal identity (in the social, economic and cultural realms) that they define by the commodities that they buy, own, use and express as the "correct signals" of social prestige.

(3) Naturalisation of market behaviour—The idea that the market regulates itself is a myth put about by capitalists: it is not a fact of life. The capitalist mode of production controls how commodities are circulated in society: this is evident when we ascribe an independent, value and reality to a thing that has no inherent value with commodity fetishism. Adorno described how artistic, spiritual, imaginative and intellectual activity becomes commodified when subordinated to the idea of the "natural commercial laws" of the market. For Debord the society of the spectacle is the ultimate form of social alienation because we view our self as a commodity that can be bought and sold—people sell a 'Hockney' so 'Hockney' sells. For Adorno autonomy and commodification stand in a dialectical relation.

(4) Masking—when we think of large-scale auctions we think of a setting where in the course of buying and selling, the commodities usually appear other than they are, because they are masked and obscured by the role-playing of the buyer and the seller. The real socio-economic character of the buying and selling—there is no attempt to tackle poverty among artists when buying a van Gogh—the obscurantism of the contract, between the artist and the capitalist, dealer and collector masks the true, exploitive nature of their economic relationship. The astounding disparity between the economic exploitation of the difference between the wages paid for the labour of the artist and the new value created by the labour of the auctioneer is ignored despite the *prima facie* absurdity and complete contradictions occur.

(5) The opacity of economic relations—As with above the prices of the commodities is everything: because of the masking of their real economic motives, the buyer, sellers, and artist do not perceive or understand every human labour-activity that was required to deliver the commodities into their hands. Marx said of the proletariat that the 'whole world passes through their hands,' but this counts for nothing except in that the results of such collective human labour are reduced to price values. The money for the Mona Lisa does not find its way back to the person sitting for the portrait.

Some questions arise here concerning domain and value assumptions:

1. Are aesthetic value separate from moral and other values?
2. Is aesthetic value superior to moral or other values?
3. Are moral qualities irrelevant to the evaluation of an art work?
4. Is the aesthetic the domain of the disinterested, distanced involving a special attitude and expertise?
5. Does art develop along its own lines autonomous of the market?

The economics of the Art World are supposedly based on the scarcity of unique objects. Often the issue of art's symbolic value is said to be more than Marx's idea of "exchange value" (although this is very complicated). At times people seem reluctant to think of art only in terms of its commodity value although clearly this is what motivates rich collectors, dealers, curators and indeed artists. Part of the process of selling art is the mystification of its value. The attitudes concerning considering art as a special category outside the commodity economy come from using art as substitute for religion in the secular world; although clearly religion had used art to express spiritual values: the icon, the totem, the shrine, the idol—someone makes them.

It may well be that art and money have always been inseparable. This enduring relationship has been transformed by a new form of capitalism—finance capitalism and developments in the art market have been following the changing investment strategies...
developments in the art market have been following the changing investment strategies in financial markets.

In previous forms of capitalism (what Weber called rational capitalism) people made money by buying and selling labour and material goods; in finance capitalism (what Weber called irrational capitalism) wealth is created through the circulation of signs backed up only by other signs. Works of art are bundled and sold as the shares of a hedge fund. Financial instruments such as derivatives create a sphere of circulation designed for the endless proliferation of monetary and financial signs. Damien Hirst wanted a piece of the action and went from being an artist to being a hedge fund manager of his art. He cleverly (i.e. before the market crashed) borrowed the financial strategy known as 'disintermediation' — he cut out galleries and dealers he had fallen out with, and went straight to investors to cut his own deal with them: works sprinkled with diamond dust would entice a greedy anonymous consortium. The art of finance has moved closer to the finance of art, art is not a mere commodity it is the currency of exchange fabricated for wealthy hedge funds and private equity firms. It has moved from the Commodification of art, to the Corporatization of art, to the Financialization of art or the Securitization of art. Hirst is copying Koons who having learned his trade on the floor of commodity exchanges, made no attempt to move beyond the commodification of art and followed this process. As market models moved towards more abstract mathematical formulae, trading in financial instruments became increasingly virtual, what was happening in the ‘real economy’ faded into insignificance and from there into wilful destruction — typified by Enron and the other’s attitude of “burn baby burn”. For Mark C. Taylor: "If each era gets the art it deserves, then the age of finance capitalism deserves the carcass of a rotting shark that no amount of formaldehyde can preserve."

The funding of art through state sponsorship, grants drawn from public funds still conditions the commercial art market to a great extent: it does a lot of the preparation and research work and provides the basis of the business of galleries and museums — the raw material. Possibly this is the weak spot in the chain. Art works still follow the economics of scarcity, they appeal to wealthy clients who have a taste for the rare, the exotic, the unique; high demand objects with a finite supply: the 'priceless commodity.'

A great deal of the value of art comes from its ownership by the super-rich — this translates into monetary worth only by circulation and exchange in the marketplace. Social wealth is symbolised in art and cultural acquisition as a form of conspicuous consumption and status emulation that adds prestige to an elite social class and expresses ownership and control of culture itself.

(a) Does contemporary art stir intelligent critiques of our world, or is it simply “part of the problem?”

(b) Is the critical function of art inseparable from its role in personal
transformation and social, political and economic change?

(c) Is it the case that artists must maintain a critical distance from governing structures and systems of exchange?

The Art Business pretends not to be doing what it is doing, but the logic of capitalism means that it allows the development of art as an autonomous field so that it can convert intangible values into exchange values with capital flows going where they want, staying where they make more money and leaving when they don't. The reality is that a small fraction of art works sell at the auction houses for huge amounts ($500,000 to millions). Is what was once called the Saatchi effect (i.e. the collection of young artists creating a collectable marketable group) still appropriate: is it an unpleasant stranglehold for those who see art and the fashionable whims of collectors as power without responsibility or accountability: **but should the art world be more democratic?**

**What of Hick’s statements here?** If we have Autonomous art why is its ultimate goal to be an ornament of capitalist culture? The development of the commodification of art as with the general principle of capitalist society reduces all values to exchange-value, is anyone bothered that some artists have gained the whole world but lost their soul?

References


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