

Creativity, Commerce, and the Elephant that Lingers in the Room

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by Douglas Dreishpoon

The lure of lucre means different things to different people, depending on who you are and who you aspire to be. When business and big money brand so many vectors of the cultural landscape, it's refreshing to see market-elevated icons like Andy Warhol and Vincent van Gogh handled, as they are in Donna De Salvo's Warhol retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art and Julian Schnabel's new film, *At Eternity's Gate*, in ways that restore their humanity by focusing on the art—where, how, and when it got made.

The relationship between creativity and commerce has always been vexed—perhaps never more so than today. The marriage of art and money is now a way of life, something we tend to take for granted without pausing to consider the ramifications for living artists. In the fall of 2012 Michael Brenson, Amy Cappellazzo, Robert Storr, and Jeanne Silverthorne joined me at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery to talk about the matter.¹ The questions raised during that session, and at a more recent session with Lisa Corinne Davis, James Siena, and Storr, sponsored by Yaddo at the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation on November 29, 2018, prompted another take, my way of keeping some of the more poignant issues on the table.

Most contemporary art ends up being seen outside of an artist's studio: in white-cube spaces at museums and kunsthallen, in palatial pavilions at international biennales, in the domestic setting of a collector's home, in solo and group exhibitions at commercial galleries, and in claustrophobic booths at art fairs anywhere. Artworks are remarkably resilient when it comes to their global circulation. Beyond the studio, art lives an alternative existence. In the studio, close to its maker, even the most eccentric art feels temporarily grounded.

There's no substitute for seeing contemporary art in situ and talking to an artist about how it gets made. These can be enlightening conversations, depending on the artist, how long he or she has been in the game, and his or her level of success. An older artist, say, over sixty-five, with an impressive track record, can afford to be philosophical about the

past and, when the occasion warrants it, as it did recently with Larry Poons in Nathaniel Kahn's documentary *The Price of Everything*, acerbically honest about the present. The conversation can focus more easily on the work, because presumably, the most pressing considerations—who you are and what really matters to you—have been sorted out. With a younger artist who is just entering the arena, there's a lot more to contend with: how to land a respectable gallery; how to prepare a presentable resume, design a website, and launch a social network; and how to entice curators, critics, and collectors. In short, how to survive as a full-time artist.

There was a time, not so long ago, when making money was less important than being true to oneself. At least that's how the painter Franz Kline posed the polemic in the fall of 1959, at the cast party for *Pull My Daisy* (the lodestar for many of Warhol's filmic escapades),² when he silenced the celebratory crowd with an impassioned speech about what it means to be a committed artist. He began by saying that for most of his life he barely got by. Only recently had the situation changed. The Pennsylvania landscapes he painted early on, which for years remained unsold in his studio, were now worth a lot. To his mind, they were still the same paintings, and he was still the same painter. His life, he insisted, was not built around fame and money. The black-and-white abstractions he created during the previous ten years changed the game for him. "Those works made me a rich man," he told those gathered, "but all of that is beyond my control, and has nothing to do with my work or my commitment." Three years before his death he was struggling in the studio to reintroduce color into the work. He admitted to the group, "My dealer [Sidney Janis] is furious. He tells me to ride it out and change when fashions change. I told him *no!* I told him, 'I paint each picture from my heart.' I've followed my heart all my life. I can't change *that!* And none of you should, either." Then, with the crowd applauding, he laid out what now seems like a prescient, philosophical coda: "Don't confuse fame and money with art. Rejoice in your fame if you get any. Spend your money if you get any. But don't ever forget what our job is. Don't forget we're in this for *life!*"³

When iconic works by Kline, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning sell for hundreds of millions of dollars, the rules of the game have obviously been rewritten. From the perspective of one who lives in the twenty-first century, observing how the spectacle of art and money colors many peoples' perception of the art world, Kline's late-in-life plea seems quaint, utterly quixotic. Still, he wasn't the only artist of his generation to bias the creative process, and to see dollars and dealers as potentially compromising influences. This may explain why there wasn't a single dealer at The Artists' Sessions (the closed, three-day conference moderated by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Richard Lippold, and Robert Motherwell in the fall of 1950), or why four years earlier, art and business, rendered as two entangled fish, one biting the other, appeared as a peripheral motif among the stout roots of Ad Reinhardt's cartoon *How to Look at Modern Art in America*.⁴ Esthetics,

artistic intentions, and commonality were the focus of the lively Artists' Sessions. Why talk about money when no one was making much of it anyway? Kline and his maverick cohorts pursued abstraction during the postwar years as though it were an act of faith, with minimal expectations for a sympathetic audience or financial remuneration. The inclusion of a dealer at their table, given the studio-centric nature of the conversations, would have been superfluous.

The studio is, in theory, the place where most art gets made, where ideas are developed, tested, and, when necessary, rejected. Things happen in the studio that cannot happen elsewhere. There, one can afford to experiment and even to fail, to be outrageous, raw, vulnerable. What takes place in the studio can always remain in the studio, where creativity has no ulterior motives, and where, as the poet Allen Ginsberg once described the spontaneous transmission of thought, you can do and say whatever you want, just "settle down in the muck of your own mind."⁵

The romantic version of an artist's studio can be envisioned as an extension of the mind, a solitary, contemplative space where one faces oneself without deflection. For many postwar painters and sculptors, the studio was sacrosanct: a self-imposed cerebral fortress immune to external influences that might intrude to undermine creative thought. How the work got made was one thing; how it eventually left the studio, to be exhibited, bought, and sold, was another proposition altogether. The perceived distance between these two worlds, between the private realm of creation and the public arena of commerce, could be as vast as a desert. But even as Kline rose to make his remarks, that gap was rapidly diminishing.

Looking back to that historical moment, realizing that today the admittedly porous boundary between public and private space has all but disappeared through cellular technologies, Warhol and his Silver Factory stand out as harbingers for a whole new socioeconomic formation within the art system. Even the studio's name implied an alternative creative cauldron: an industrial loft covered with reams of silver foil, Mylar, and mirrors; stocked with paint, silkscreens, newspapers, and film; blaring rock and roll and opera; and humming with all kinds of people and activities, day in and day out. The Factory was quintessentially urban, more social crossroads than sequestered study. Never mind the solitary winds that blew through David Smith's sculpture fields at Bolton Landing, or the isolated, ramshackle shed that served as Pollock's painting studio at The Springs on Long Island; Warhol thrived in a kinetic, carnival-like atmosphere—a constant barrage of images, white noise, and chatter. Before Valerie Solanas appeared at the artist's post-Factory office space on 33 Union Square West with a loaded gun in 1968, he loved having people around, even when they weren't assisting him with the art, which he projected in pragmatic, non-emotional terms, as both interesting ideas and salable commodities. Having cut his artistic teeth on commercial illustrations and window

displays, Warhol set out to market and promote himself, long before there was such a thing as social networking, just as he set his sights on securing a top-notch gallery as quickly as possible.

No sensible artist today would dare nurture her creativity in total isolation, hoping that someday her work would be discovered by a sympathetic gallerist. Still, the commercial crossroads is no place for sensitive souls, and even the most ambitious, thick-skinned individual soon discovers that the transition from studio to reputable gallery can be a tough one to navigate. Some artists never get past the starting gate. Wallace Berman, an early defector, vowed never again to exhibit in an American gallery after he was busted by the Los Angeles Police Department, in 1957, two weeks after his first solo show opened at the Ferus Gallery.⁶ On the opposite coast, by the middle of the same decade, Clyfford Still eschewed all gallery representation after three solo exhibitions with Betty Parsons and a brief affiliation with Janis. So unlike his predecessors, Warhol always kept his eyes on the art-as-business prize, taking all slights in stride, even an early interaction with Martha Jackson, who, after offering him a one-year contract with a solo exhibition in 1962, ended up cancelling both.⁷

Contemporary dealers rightly occupy some of the upper perches of the art system's pecking order. For as long as the art market has existed, gallerists have been one of the essential conduits through which collectable objects are bought, sold, and traded. Since the 1960s their status has risen exponentially, due in part to the escalating number of college-educated artists seeking representation for their work, and to a culture that increasingly devours art as a collectible commodity. Warhol wasn't the first artist to realize that dealers jumpstart careers. But he was one of the first to strategize how to go about securing someone, which no doubt accounts for his symbiotic relationship with Leo Castelli's assistant Ivan Karp, who had previously worked for Jackson.⁸ Artists may be the prime movers, but dealers stoke the market's pistons by giving artists their first commercial exhibitions, promoting their progress, and, most important, conducting all primary sales. Without gallerists, there would be no art market as we know it. Even so, the dealer's role is inherently complicated.

"Art dealers are in some ways the most conflicted and maligned members of the art world and also the most essential to its lively functioning," Roberta Smith wrote in the context of reviewing an exhibition of photographs by contemporary dealers. "After artists, they risk the most, putting their money where their taste and, usually, their hearts are."⁹ Some of the most astute postwar dealers, particularly the women, were artists of one stripe or another before they began selling the art of others. Jackson, for one, tried her hand at it, but after studying with Hans Hofmann and associating with artists far more adept than she was, she changed her mind. So did Parsons, who, like Jackson, introduced difficult art—by Still, Newman, Pollock, and Rothko—to a bewildered public.

Parson, however, never relinquished the creative dream. "I would give up my gallery in a second if the world would accept me as an artist," she confessed years later to Richard Tuttle.¹⁰

Dealers who begin as artists, and those who continue to harbor artistic aspirations, should in principle be more empathetic to the creative process—its unpredictable ups and downs. But commercial markets flourish on product exchange, and if one's focus shifts from the primary maker to the secondary market, making money may supersede nurturing a career. It's a delicate balance even in the best of circumstances.

"A gallery has a responsibility to its artists," Paula Cooper advised Carter Ratcliff in 1988. "You have to keep prices reasonable, because if they go too high, it hurts the artist's overall market among the gallery's collectors, and of course that primary market is what gives the artist a livelihood. The artist isn't helped if an occasional piece goes for a huge price in the secondary market."¹¹ In all fairness, dealers must pay the bills to keep their operations solvent, and secondary sales are a viable way to do this. The rub is that living artists rarely benefit directly from a secondary sale, which is why, when it comes to the marketing of contemporary art, dealers have some tough decisions to make.

At a time when many artists choose to sell their own work, publish their own catalogues, court their own collectors, maintain their own photographic records and archives, and secure their own commissions, how much of a cut for any gallery is justified? How much is a gallery entitled to take, given what they actually do for a specific artist? Granted, without secondary sales, there can be no sustained market. But secondary sales inevitably affect the primary market, which constantly adjusts to reflect auction results. So, then, how does one view the relationship between a dealer and an auction house, when the dealer consigns contemporary work to a sale that potentially influences the primary market? At what point does a bullish secondary market become a burden rather than a boon for a living artist, whose primary market may become precariously inflated? And what are the long-term consequences for a living artist when an auction house enters the primary market through internal partnerships or direct sales of the artist's own work?¹²

The auction room is no place for a living artist whose work is slated for the block. That didn't stop Robert Rauschenberg from showing up at Sotheby's Parke-Bernet on the evening of October 18, 1973, to watch fifty works from the Robert C. Scull Collection, including some of his own, get auctioned off. Warhol might have been thrilled, if he hadn't been waiting at home for the tallied results, to see one of his monumental flower paintings prominently displayed in the room. Rauschenberg was less forgiving; with a few drinks under his belt, he confronted Scull, face to face, for selling one his Combine paintings, *Thaw* from 1958, less than fifteen years after he purchased it for \$900, and for

making \$85,000 in the transaction, not a penny of which the artist would see.¹³ That the Scull auction actually went on to reset the market for artists like Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Warhol, all of whom would eventually benefit from its outcome, didn't resolve the issue of resale compensation. That would happen three years later, in 1976, and only in the State of California, with the implementation of the California Resale Royalty Act, which entitled artists or their heirs to a 5% royalty on the resale of any work sold for more than \$1,000. That law, on the books for thirty-four years and recently at the center of four class-action suits brought by artists Chuck Close and Laddie John Dill, the estate of the sculptor Robert Graham, and the Sam Francis Foundation against Sotheby's, Christie's, and eBay, was finally overruled, in July 2018, by a federal court of appeals.¹⁴

In a post-Warhol culture, the commodification of art has meant different things to different individuals. One could critique the phenomenon, as the sculptor Carl Andre did in 1976, as a capitalist system perpetuated by the fetishization of product exchange.¹⁵ Or one could suggest, as Ratcliff did ten years later in an article that appeared in *Art in America*, that "Western art gains its entrepreneurial flavor from the Western self"; that "We define ourselves in competition for economic profits that, thoroughly examined, reveal other aspects—social, cultural, esthetic"; and that "The esthetic is an aspect of the economic, as the economic is an aspect of the esthetic."¹⁶ Regardless of how one theorizes or rationalizes the economics, the long-term consequences of a contemporary art market propelled by primary and secondary auction sales remains an open question in terms of its effect on living artists, young and old, who may or may not benefit. When art enters the bullpen of commerce, it becomes transactional property like any other commodity in a post-capitalist system, leaving the aura of its maker intact but potentially denatured.

The art world will always be a breeding ground for metaphorical rhapsody, both denigrating and illuminating. During a lively panel at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1983, the New York art world was compared to an amoeba in the way provocative art (of any ilk) is eventually assimilated by the art system.¹⁷ Something inexplicable might be happening out there, and if a critical mass of interest generates, the amoeba lumbers toward it, motivated by curiosity, the prospect of monetary gain, and an insatiable hunger for the new. When the organism reaches the source, it begins to envelop and ingest it by bringing multiple constituencies—gallerists, critics, curators, and collectors—to bear on the process. Being in the audience that evening, I immediately thought of someone like Jean-Michel Basquiat, still under most people's radar, as well as graffiti artists like Rammellzee (Stephen Piccirello), Crash (John Matos), Daze (Chris Ellis), Lady Pink (Sandra Fabara), Fab 5 Freddy (Fred Brathwaite), Futura 2000 (Leonard

McGurr), and Lee Quinones—who, having surreptitiously tagged and painted subway cars for years under the shadow of night, were edging toward the spotlight, soon to be mainstreamed through a group show at the Sidney Janis Gallery.

The amoebic analogy also shed light on earlier historical precedents: savvy renegade artists, who, during the 1960s and 1970s, attempted to bypass the market with works tethered to natural sites or existing only as conceptual conceits. As it turned out, even the most inaccessible land art could be documented, and even the most ephemeral scraps of paper could be collected. Eventually, even the most wayward and rarified expressions could be bought and sold. That night a poignant realization rose from the inner sanctum of the Guggenheim's august auditorium: art and money were inextricably bound in exhilarating and unsettling ways.

Art in America's "Art and Money" issue published five years later, in 1988, now appears like a bracing bolt of clarity. There was Joseph Beuys on the cover, front and center, standing beneath the enormous tusks of a mastodon-like creature, between which the words "Kunst = Kapital" are inscribed in blood-red paint. For the special issue, prompted by runaway auction prices fanning an excessively inflated art market, editor Betsy Baker rounded up critics, art historians, artists, and dealers to comment on the situation. If there was any consensus among the group, it was that the rules of the game had indeed changed, dramatically, and that contemporary artists had to somehow adapt. Joan Semmel summed up the challenge when she explained to Eleanor Heartney, "My generation's mythology involved the romance of being true to oneself. You were supposed to starve, because success meant you weren't really honest, and then be rediscovered by the next generation. . . . To be an artist meant to choose a different lifestyle—to live minimally, with cheap rent and minimal needs and somehow survive. Today no one can afford that romance."¹⁸

Two years later, in July 1990, for the sequel "Art and Money" issue, thirteen more artists were interviewed about the pros and cons of balancing creativity with lucre. To read through their edited transcripts is to realize just how sensitive the subject remains. Some of those interviewed were more forthcoming than others; the conversation is never an easy one. The most telling remarks came from John Baldessari, the oldest member of the group, who unknowingly echoed Kline's cautionary plea made thirty-one years earlier. "Money and the possibility of success can have two kinds of effects," he told Lilly Wei,

There are the conscious effects and then the unconscious effects that you can't put your finger on. . . . What will the hope of money and acclamation prompt you to do unconsciously? There's nothing wrong with making money, but if it's the tail wagging the dog, then you've lost your way. . . . For a dealer, the only reality is the rent; that's what Ivan Karp said years ago, and it's still very true. A lot of ambiguities about artist-dealer relationships would be cleared up if art dealers were called art merchants. That's what they do. They sell art for money. . . . Sylvia Plath got up at three in the morning and wrote some pretty good poetry. That's what it takes to be an artist. It's about bloody-mindedness. It's not about living the good life. In the end, it's just you and the art. I've always admired poets. They're the last pure artists. Nobody buys the stuff. All they have are themselves and a piece of paper.¹⁹

It took a poet to see creativity as an inexplicable gift that comes and goes according to its own volition and isn't contingent on making money. "A work of art is a gift," wrote Lewis Hyde. "Works of art exist in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy. One of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art."²⁰ Granted, poets are not visual artists, and a poem on paper is not the same as, say, paint on canvas, or even works of music, dance, or literature, particularly when it comes to its economic potential. The creative gift, though, even as it transcends medium and market, can be a fragile, vulnerable entity.

Any marriage is inherently rife with compromise. What's disconcerting today is not that some artists are making significant sums of money and living comfortably off of what they do, but that the marriage of art and money is now writ, as though one couldn't possibly exist without the other. It has been nearly thirty more years since Baldessari nailed the quandary, and the conundrum remains: there's an elephant in the room that art occupies. When money influences one's perception of art, the art may suffer misunderstanding. And when the lure of lucre bleeds into the creative process, artists may find themselves in awkward predicaments, having to make difficult decisions concerning where and how much of their art is exhibited at any one time, what kind of art might sell best, how to professionally market themselves without losing control over that which is being marketed, and how to simply make art free from someone else's stipulations or expectations. Certain conversations become harder to have, because with more at stake, there's much more to lose. And yet, at the end of any day, finding ways to preserve the integrity of the creative act may still be an existential battle worth waging.

Notes

1. "Roundtable: Creativity and Commerce," moderated by Douglas Dreishpoon, *Art in America*, May 2013, 67–72. Matthew Marks, proprietor of gallery spaces in New York and Los Angeles, was unable to attend the session. His comments, prompted

by questions about artists, auction houses, art fairs, and the Resale Royalty Act, were transcribed from a conversation recorded at his 523 West Twenty-Fourth Street space in New York on August 1, 2012.

2. *Pull My Daisy*, directed by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie and adapted by Jack Kerouac from the third act of his play *Beat Generation*, featured improvised performances by poets Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso, artists Larry Rivers and Alice Neel, composer/musician David Amram, art dealer Richard Bellamy, Delphine Seyrig, dancer Sally Gross, and Pablo Frank, Robert Frank's son. Filmed in Leslie's loft at Fourth Avenue and Twelfth Street in Manhattan, *Pull My Daisy* quietly entered the pantheon of independent film as a countercultural icon.
3. The artist quoted in David Amram, *Offbeat: Collaborating with Kerouac* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2002), 82.
4. See "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)," ed. Robert Goodnough, in *Modern Artists in America*, ed. Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951); for a roundup of Reinhardt's art comics, see *How to Look: Ad Reinhardt, Art Comics* (David Zwirner/Hatje Cantz, 2013).
5. Allen Ginsberg, "First Thought, Best Thought," from his Spiritual Poetics class, July 29, 1974; reprinted in *Composed on the Tongue* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1980), 112.
6. Wallace Berman's apprehension by the Los Angeles Vice Squad (for a purportedly pornographic drawing displayed in one of his installations) is recounted in Rebecca Solnit, "Ferus: The End of the Beginning," *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), 18–23; and Kristine McKenna, *The Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin* (Grottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009), 31.
7. The little-known story of Jackson's courtship of Warhol begins with John Weber, then Jackson's assistant, who had begun selling Warhol's work out of the gallery and set out to convince Jackson, and the gallery's executive committee, that they should be the first to represent the artist; see Douglas Dreishpoon, "Collecting History," *The Long Curve: 150 Years of Visionary Collecting at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery* (Buffalo, NY, and Milan: Albright-Knox Art Gallery in association with Skira: 2011), 32–33.
8. *Ibid.*, 41, note 66. In August 1963, a year after Jackson cancelled Warhol's contract, she penned a note to her former assistant, urging him to consider Warhol for Castelli's gallery.
9. Roberta Smith, "The Art and Heart of the Dealer," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2011, C21.
10. Richard Tuttle, "Things Betty Said," *The Painted Sculptures of Betty Parsons* (Naples, FL: Naples Museum of Art, 2005), 21.
11. Paula Cooper interviewed by Carter Ratcliff for "Dealers Talk . . .," *Art in America*,

July 1988, 79.

12. In 2008 Christie's entered into the primary market through a short-lived partnership with Haunch of Venison; see Alexandra Peers, "Christie's Morphs into a Dealer," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2008, D7. And in September 2008 Sotheby's auctioned off new works by Damien Hirst; see *ArtNet News*, June 20, 2008. The auction, more a performance than a traditional sale, ended up netting more than \$200 million. Hirst credits Warhol's Business Art model as the catalyst for his affiliation with Sotheby's; see Blake Gopnik, "The Indelible Warhol Inc.," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2018, 16.
13. See Judith Goldman, *Robert & Ethel Scull: Portrait of a Collection* (New York: Acquavella Galleries, 2010).
14. See Patricia Cohen, "Artists File Lawsuits, Seeking Royalties," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2011; Jori Finkel and Mike Boehm, "Sam Francis Foundation Sues Nine Galleries for Artists' Royalties," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 2011; and Amanda Svachula, "California Tried to Give Artists a Cut. But Judge Said No," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2018, C2.
15. Carl Andre and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Commodity and Contradiction, or, Contradiction as Commodity," *October* (Summer 1976), 100–04.
16. Carter Ratcliff, "The Marriage of Art and Money," *Art in America*, July 1988, 84.
17. The panel "Fads, Trends, or Movements?," hosted at the Guggenheim Museum on the evening of November 1, 1983, included artist Chuck Close, curator Barbara Haskell, and two New York dealers, Brooke Alexander and Angela Westwater.
18. Joan Semmel to Eleanor Heartney, "Arts vs the Market," *Art in America*, July 1988, 29.
19. John Baldessari interviewed by Lilly Wei for "Making Art, Making Money: 13 Artists Comment," *Art in America*, July 1990, 133–34.
20. Lewis Hyde, "Introduction," *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1979), xi.

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