

A CRITIC PONDERES THE END OF NORMAL AND THE FUTURE OF ART

A recent memoir, penned by the daughter-in-law of disgraced financier Bernard Madoff, proves as good a place as any to kick off a discussion about contemporary art's future-based-on-present-circumstances. Its title: *The End of Normal* (2011). Also described as the end of 'economic life as we have known it' by Pacific Investment Management Company's (PIMCO, a global investment fund) Bill Gross, the global scenario of too much debt, too little trust, growing financial instability and a burgeoning politics of protest has shaken the foundations of a winner-take-all general culture whose art, until recently, has been largely content to serve as head cheerleader.

The coming days won't see many pep rallies – the economic forecasts are that gloomy. According to Gross, the world and his wife face the growing possibility of zero-rate growth or 'implosion'. The same expert (who dubbed the period before the 2008 credit meltdown 'the Old Normal' and the years that followed 'the New Normal') warns about a future he darkly dubs 'the Paranormal'. As per always, the superrich will escape this contagion. As for artists, individually and collectively, the choice to engage or ignore the glaring social and moral inequities that sustain creators (either financially or aspirationally) will turn even starker.

There's no way to put this except bluntly: during the past three decades, experimentation in downtown New York (and in London, Paris, Tokyo, et al.) has largely been about creating exotic financial instruments. The reigning paradigm of 'business art' – a campy Warhol coinage that effectively transformed the top tier of artworld activity into a mini-bond market – has emulated the economic, social and cultural biases of neoliberalism with a vengeance. Today, self-styled alpha gallerists, collectors and artists not only account for a lopsided share of the art pie; they continue to dominate its creative culture. Gordon Gekkos of the SWAG economy (the acronym describes the asset bubbles of silver, wine, art and gold), these predators would now, however incidentally, steer what's left of the artworld over a cliff with what can only be termed robber-baronry recklessness.

To paraphrase from a performance by the Bruce High Quality Foundation, art history in the last 30 years has become the history of certain artists' careers in the market. The limitations of such an inheritance are excruciatingly obvious. Without a corrective, Damien Hirst's dotted spots will come to define our artistic era like William-Adolphe Bouguereau's slick bimbos did his. Thankfully, contemporary art retains a pilot light of sane judgement – however dim – in the form of certain figures (among others, generous creators Gustav Metzger, William Kentridge and Ai Weiwei). After the economic downturn and the success of anticapitalist protests from Seattle to Santiago, the age of cynicism might yet turn to these notables to guide us back from the brink.

Where the artworld was content to function largely as an echo chamber in the past, several real-life questions about contemporary art and artists have of late acquired newfound buzz. Joe and Jane Sixpack might be curious to know what, besides cosying up to wealthy art patrons, artists

are good for. Liberal intellectuals may be confused by so much ethical and aesthetic relativism – consider only this year's alleged Knoedler forgeries and Marina Abramovic's divisive LA MOCA gala – and truly wonder whether art has any role left to play in shaping society.

A *New Yorker* article from last year, for example, described the principal function of the artist as 'feeling crummy before everyone else does'. A popular idea about the avant-garde distilled into a glib phrase, it amounts to a vision of the artist as Holden Caulfield unburdening himself, selfishly, like a git. 'Misery loves company, so please enjoy my text-based installation about bananafish.' Surely there's more at stake than self-expression. Now that a few of culture's basic social and economic premises are up for grabs, artists eager to engage the issues of their time (like the NYC-based Working Artists and the Greater Economy, or W.A.G.E.) might want to do so without channelling the callow whining of J.D. Salinger.

I'll just come out and say it: artworks, in all their blessed autonomy, should be seen as part of a larger social or moral terrain. It's high time that artists – for the sake of their future real-world relevance – swapped their gentrifying roles and auction-house dreams for a social conscience.



Damien Hirst, 'Household Glass on Canvas', 1995, household glass on canvas, 69 x 69 cm, 1 cm spot. Photo: Prudence Cumming Associates, London. © Damien Hirst and