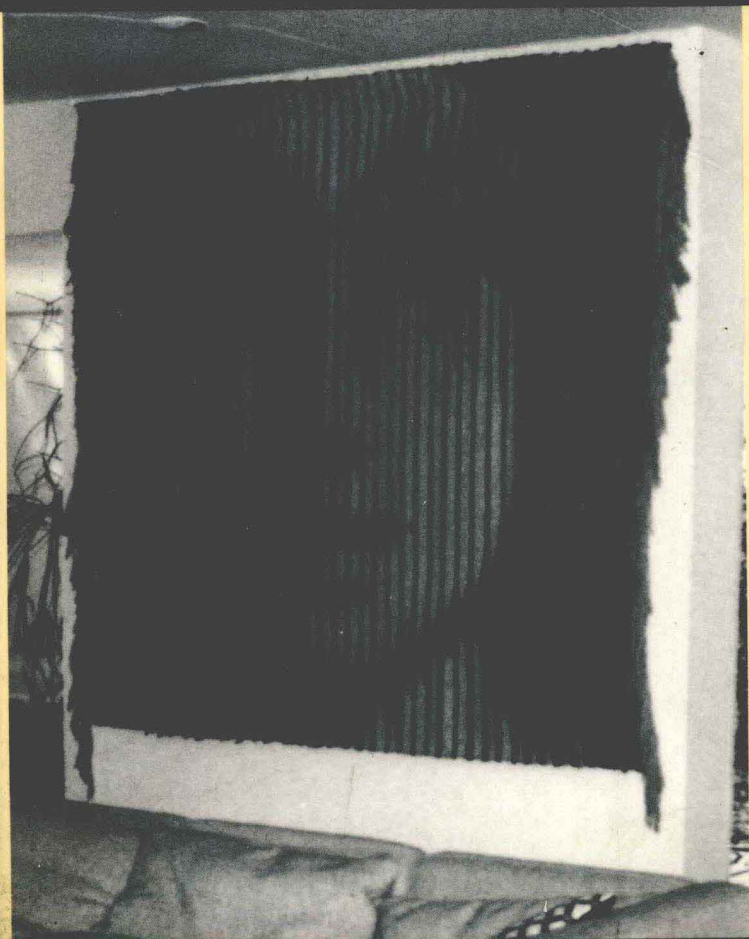


HIGH ART DOWN HOME

AN ECONOMIC ETHNOGRAPHY OF A LOCAL ART MARKET



Stuart Plattner

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of a Local Art Market

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For Phyllis, Jessie and Dan

The love and appreciation [of art] is practiced everywhere, and the world treats it as merchandise and bribes; this is indeed a fault of our age.

Cai Tao, Chinese scholar, twelfth century (Alsop 1982, 146)

There is a time line one can draw from cave paintings from Lascaux, in southern France and Spain, to what you are seeing in the Whitney Biennial and what people are writing about in *Art Forum*, *Art in America*, *Art International*. . . . Now the center, the international center, for this is New York. . . . Most of the people in St. Louis are not working, consciously working, within this format. . . . Most of the ideas of the people who are working in a city like St. Louis, or anywhere out of the center, are things that they want to be doing. They are not consciously striving to be in the Whitney Biennial next year, or to show at the Carnegie International. They mostly are doing their own thing.

St. Louis dealer

Preface

Personal History in Art and Anthropology

This is a book of economic anthropology about the contemporary high-art market in a major midwestern city. The goal of the book is to introduce readers to an art market like the majority of places in the country situated below the New York apex. Readers will learn about the economic behavior of artists, dealers, and collectors—the principle triad of the art market—as well as critics and curators, through exposure to their relationships, goals, successes, and frustrations. The main point of the book is that the market for contemporary museum-quality art is a contradiction, always teetering between the heaven of aesthetic theory and practice and the hell of invoices and utility bills.

Since anthropologists usually write about more exotic places and situations, I should explain my interest and experience in the subject of contemporary local art markets. Throughout my childhood everyone thought that I would be an artist. I attended a professional art school, the Cooper Union in New York City, majoring in fine art—in painting. Upon graduation in 1958 I did not want to confront the difficulties of earning a living as a fine artist, so I worked as a commercial artist in advertising and textile design. After a few years I went back to school as the first step on a path to a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology, completed in 1969, with a specialization in the economic behavior of people in peasant marketing systems.

Through the years I studied how people make economic decisions under conditions of relative scarcity and lack of information. At the same time I watched my wife and old friends invent careers as professional fine artists. This meant that they learned to run tiny businesses out of their homes, with no prior training and, sometimes, no aptitude. Artists are taught to make art, not to run businesses, and those who are overtly businesslike are regarded by their peers with suspicion, disdain, covert envy, and other unpleasant emotions. Artists were curious to me because they worked so hard for so little income yet felt conflict about receiving money for their work. I resolved to do a study of the business of art.

Fieldwork in St. Louis, Missouri

My opportunity came in 1992 when I became eligible for a long-term professional-development leave from my employment at the same time that my wife was invited to be a visiting professor at the Washington University School of Fine Arts in St. Louis. We had lived in St. Louis from 1971 to 1985, during which time she had taught art part-time at Washington University and had exhibited and lectured on her work in local galleries and museums. She was well known in art circles, so I had access to key people. Of the 140 people I asked to interview, only 3 refused (a couple of others never returned my calls). I could not have succeeded in interviewing so many different people if they had not known me or my wife and been familiar with her artistic reputation.

The 137 formal interviews that this book is based on were conducted from September 1992 through July 1993. Each interview took between one and two hours. I discussed my intention to write a book about the St. Louis art market and assured respondents of confidentiality in the written material. A bit more than half of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed; the rest were transcribed during the interview. During this time I also attended numerous art functions as a "participant observer," the classical anthropological field method.

In a broader sense, I've been a participant-observer in the U.S. professional art world since 1958. My friends from the Cooper Union had followed the career path of artists during this era, meaning that most became academics to support themselves while trying to "make it" with their art in the relevant local and national market. A few succeeded in supporting themselves and their families from the sale of their art; some switched careers, as I did, while others lived the academic life. I hope this book does not disappoint them.

Method

I describe the nature of a local contemporary art market the way a realist painter would depict a landscape. Like an artist, my goal is to represent reality by applying disciplinary methods through a personal focus. Someone else studying the same subject at the same time might produce a different work, perhaps more heavily weighted toward local history or aesthetic theory. While the reality is multifaceted and this study concentrates on economic behavior, this book does not have a narrow focus. Anyone interested in the contemporary fine-art world will enjoy learning

about the St. Louis case because it is so normal, and because the book has the generalist perspective demanded by the ethnographic method.

The interviewees were selected in order to cover the issues I thought were important, such as seniority, gender, race, and position in the local art hierarchy. The set of sixty-five artists interviewed, selected from a list of approximately eight hundred in St. Louis (see chap. 4), is heavily weighted toward the fine-art and professional-artist end of the spectrum—which I call *avant-garde*. I did not draw a random sample of artists because I already knew the important types to interview, and I wanted to interview the representative, interesting individuals among those types. Therefore, I have not given distributional statistics about the sample of sixty-five artists interviewed. I am reasonably certain that my roster of about eight hundred artists is complete and can be generalized from. A random sampling would focus much more on hobbyists, craftspersons, and on designers and commercial artists, since they form a much larger part of the total than is represented here.

Interviews have been assigned a number code, given after each quote or sequence of quotes from the same person. The interview tapes and transcriptions are available to serious researchers who can satisfy my concerns about the protection of the respondents' privacy.

The material in this book is my personal responsibility and has not been approved or disapproved by the National Science Foundation.

Outline of the Book

The introductory chapter discusses the themes of differentiation and hegemony in the art market, the paradox of art as commodity versus art as cultural capital, and the social construction of value in the art market. The value of ethnography is to show how these general issues are exemplified in the particular, and how global themes are adumbrated in local realities. The key ethnographic strategy is to understand local context, and the starting point for that is history and place.

Chapter 2 summarizes the historical context that set the stage for contemporary art world actors. The phenomenal boom of the 1970s and 1980s and the bust of 1990 provide the historical backdrop against which people act, although the chapter points out that critical features of the contemporary scene are direct outgrowths of the impressionist revolution in the art world in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

St. Louis as a place is introduced in chapter 3, which describes the cultural geography of the city and introduces the major public institutions,

including museums and artist societies. St. Louis is the seventeenth largest metropolitan area in the United States, ranked by population. It is big enough to have practically every cultural institution one would want, but too small to have more than one of each.

Artists, dealers, and collectors are described in chapters 4, 5, and 6. The description of their life strategies and situations, relations, and expectations, both positive and negative, forms the heart of the book, giving ethnographic richness to the abstract issues introduced here.

Chapter 7 summarizes the theoretical issues covered and generalizes the relevance of the material. Transactions in the U.S. art market are compared to those in peasant markets, because of the asymmetrical information available to both parties in the transaction. Reliance on personal relations and trust is a common thread in transactions where the risk of losing is high and the cost of information to lower the risk is unacceptable. Finally, the pros and cons of living one's life in the St. Louis art market are summarized.

Acknowledgments

My primary debt is to my wife, Phyllis Baron Plattner, with whom I've discussed art and anthropology for over thirty years. She gave me the benefit of her editorial criticism while I was writing this book, but the opinions expressed are my own. If I have inadvertently displeased any member of the art world, they should understand that I am responsible, not Phyllis.

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I/ Introduction

I am very hesitant to go into a gallery and buy pictures because I don't know whether I'm being cheated or not, and . . . I find you have to bargain, and I hate that. I'm a poor bargainer, because I really don't know the values. [A dealer] said, "Well, we don't do that [bargain] at all. Ours is a fixed price." So I said, "Ah, finally, an honest dealer!" So . . . I went into his gallery, and . . . [he] pulled out some things and showed me. And I said, "How much is this?" And he said, "Well, that's normally three thousand dollars, but for you, two thousand dollars." And I thought, "Oh, shit! Another god-damned thief."

St. Louis collector

In the summer of 1990 Vincent van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* was sold at Christie's New York auction house to a Japanese buyer for \$82.5 million.¹ It is truly ironic that this was the highest price ever paid for a work of art, because van Gogh was the prototypical modern artist: marginalized by society, fiercely devoting all of his energies to making his uniquely personal art, emotionally tortured (Dr. Gachet was the physician who watched over him in the months before his suicide) (fig. 1). Although van Gogh's brother Theo was an art dealer in Paris during the 1880s, Vincent's paintings never sold,² and he lived and died in poverty. Van Gogh's marginalization, poverty, intense commitment to his art, and lack of market success during his lifetime are cherished facts to contemporary artists. No matter how difficult their own career, they can rationalize to themselves, friends, and family that van Gogh had it worse.

Members of the international art market were astounded at the price paid for *Dr. Gachet*. The tide that produced a fabulous price for an important van Gogh also raised the prices of mediocre art to unprecedented levels. The market seemed overheated and due for a correction, and the bust, in fact, came in the same year. The big-spending Japanese withdrew, speculative buyers in the United States lost money, sales decreased, dealers went out of business, and artists who had been living off their painting sales began looking for teaching jobs to pay the rent.

While this drama was being played out in New York, London, Paris, and other art market centers, another, parallel reality coexisted "down



FIG. 1. Vincent van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, which sold at auction in 1990 for \$82.5 million. The artist died a miserable death about a hundred years before, having been a commercial failure in his lifetime.

home" in the wider society. Artists who were not fabulously successful, dealers whose average sale was less than one ten-thousandth of *Dr. Gachet's* price, and collectors who wouldn't dream of owning an original van Gogh lived their lives in the context of regional art markets.³ This book describes one such market, the contemporary fine-art world in St. Louis, Missouri.⁴ St. Louis is one of several dozen medium-sized cities

with lively art markets where most of the nation's artists, dealers, collectors, critics, and curators of contemporary fine art live.

Such regional markets exist in the hegemonic shadow of New York. The geographic distance implies a drop in value: the work of regional artists is appreciated less than the same art would be if it were created in New York, by the same artists. Art created in a regional market, "not in New York" (or "not in Paris," or "not in London"), suffers a devaluation of its perceived quality *at home*, independently of the objective qualities of the work, simply because it is not in the hegemonic center. Robert Hughes, art critic for *Time* magazine, calls this self-denial of artistic value "cultural colonialism," meaning "the assumption that whatever you do in the field of writing, painting, sculpture, architecture, film, dance or theater is of unknown value until it is judged by people outside your own society" (1990, 4). He describes growing up as an artist in Australia, suffering the reflexive "cultural cringe" of "demanding of yourself that your work measure up to standards that cannot be shared or debated where you live" (4). This is the situation for most art market actors all across the country, if not the world, and the material in this book can be generalized to all such representative local communities wherever they exist. The first of this book's major themes is the brute fact of New York's hegemony and the ways art market actors deal with their peripheral status.

To drive home the idea of hegemony: it seems clear that most of the thousands of art world actors in New York have more in common with their St. Louis counterparts than they do with the well-publicized, but extraordinarily few, art stars represented in the national media. Work by the common artist in New York is not represented in elite galleries, and such artists have no chance of earning an income from the sale of their work. Even those in New York are socioeconomically *far* from the centers of art market power—the few elite galleries and museum shows that define the state of the art (see Rosenbaum 1993; Solomon 1993). These are the "real people" in the art world.

The value of knowing about down-home art worlds is that they form the base of the pyramid topped by New York. While the "New York scene" is glamorous, it is also atypical, in the sense that the majority (over 80 percent by census figures) of art market actors do not live in the New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago centers. The art world most people in the country interact with is much more like St. Louis than New York. This book shows what the real world is like for most art world actors.

Defining Museum-Quality Fine Art

This study focuses on “museum-quality” visual artworks. These are most often paintings or sculptures that could conceivably be shown in the contemporary art section of an art museum. Fine art has a remarkable status in contemporary society. While most of the artwork sold in the world costs less than five thousand dollars, prices can be fabulous. Paintings by a select few living artists can sell for hundreds of thousands, in some cases millions, of dollars. The auction market alone reached \$3.6 billion in 1990.⁵ Attendance at art museums reached 164 million in 1992 and has increased since then. While elitists may quibble that museum visitors are only interested in populist blockbuster shows, or that the visitor statistics are inflated by large groups of school classes herded through, the fact is that people are visiting art museums in record numbers.⁶ Such is the evidence of high art’s importance in society.

Individuals who are known for their practical tough-mindedness and successful economic dealings spend immense sums of money and speak metaphysically about art objects, recognizing that they possess real power to affect their personal lives. Charles Simpson, a sociologist who studied the SoHo art community in New York, points out that high art renews “the vision of civilization” and revitalizes society (1981, 6). Simpson justifies art’s unique status in grand terms.

The art community, producers and informed audiences, believes that aesthetically successful new imagery pushes the horizons of reality away from us all, expanding civilized consciousness. Should the process of creating new vision cease, should the fine-art challenge go unmet, then the world would become visually finite. It would be as if civilization, having trod a path inscribing reality, were to confront again its own footprints and the realization of the closed nature of that reality. (1981, 6)⁷

As melodramatic as this may sound to those unconnected to the art world, it is a realistic figure of speech for people involved in fine art. It justifies the hype and high prices, since expanding our cultural capital is as important as providing food and shelter—more important, some would argue, since art gives meaning to material survival. Fine art is similar to religion, then, as an institution that counteracts the crassly commercial search for advancement in a capitalist world. At the same time, these objects of supposedly sublime vision are bought and sold as commodities. But art is a strange commodity: aesthetic excellence does not necessarily

make for marketability. Work that experts agree is high-quality, significantly avant-garde art does not always command high prices, and often is not salable at all. This paradox is the second major theme of this book: fine-art objects are valued by two different, sometimes contradictory appraisal systems, one of art-historical connoisseurship and one of commodity marketability.

In an age of conceptual, minimal, and performance art, it is often unclear what museum-quality high art is supposed to look like. All sorts of things are exhibited in art museums. In March 1993, for example, the St. Louis Art Museum showed “self-portraits” consisting of pieces of canvas that the artist had laid at the door to his studio for a month. The canvases had vaguely defined scuff marks that, the curator wrote, revealed

the footprints, and thus the presence, of those (artist included) who entered and exited the artist’s studio. Traditionally a self-portrait records the artist’s “character” or “essence.” With these works [the artist] has left such obvious metaphysics behind by concretizing time and making objects of his experiential, not physical, self. (Wylie 1993)

What is a humble ethnographer, seeking to delimit the field of study of the fine-art world, to make of these sorts of art objects and this sort of “art speech”?⁷⁸ It reminds one of those exotic ethnographic situations where a reasonable informant reports fantastic facts, as, for example, when a Mexican peddler told me in 1967 that he had wrestled with a supernatural witch-spirit in his backyard. The anthropological strategy is not to impose a viewpoint or set of standards on “native” cosmology. We study the world as we find it and try to make sense of what exists. It seems impossible, at this postmodern moment in art history, to define in philosophical or aesthetic terms the formal physical characteristics of high art in such a way that a well-intentioned, intelligent, educated observer who was not expert in the art world could apply the criteria without error. This introduces the third broad theme of this study: the social life of fine-art objects is in large part independent of their objective physical qualities.

It is the art critic’s job to distinguish fine work from junk. Robert Hughes, for example, is sharply critical of art he considers to be bad (1990). But for every authoritative pronouncement that contemporary art by hot names such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jeff Koons, and Julian Schnabel is trash—that the emperor has no clothes—there is an equally authoritative assertion of the art-historical significance of the same work