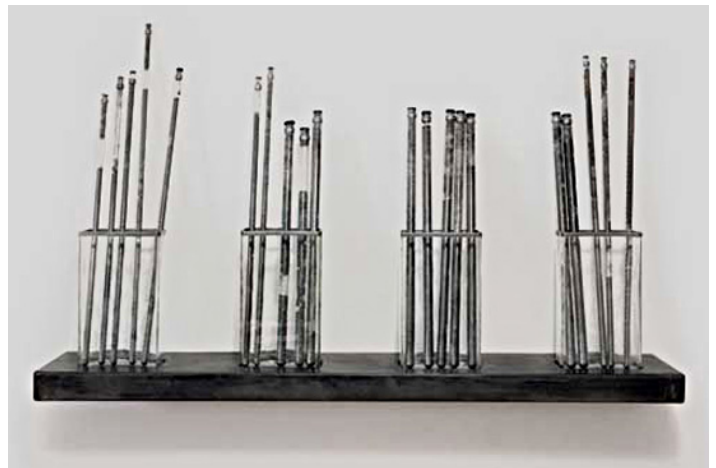


Boris Groys  
**Art and Money**

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The relationship between art and money can be understood in at least two ways. First, art can be interpreted as a sum of works circulating on the art market. In this case, when we speak about art and money, we think primarily of spectacular developments in the art market that took place in recent decades: the auctions of modern and contemporary art, the huge sums that were paid for works, and so forth – what newspapers mostly report on when they want to say something about contemporary art. It is now beyond doubt that art can be seen in the context of the art market and every work of art can function as a commodity.

On the other hand, contemporary art also functions in the context of permanent and temporary exhibitions. The number of large-scale, temporary exhibitions – biennials, triennials, Documenta, Manifestas – is constantly growing. These exhibitions are not primarily for art buyers, but for the general public. Similarly, art fairs, which are supposedly meant to serve art buyers, are now increasingly transformed into public events, attracting people with little interest in, or finances for, buying art. Since exhibitions cannot be bought and sold, the relationship between art and money takes here another form. In exhibitions, art functions beyond the art market, and for that reason requires financial support, whether public or private.



Detail of Susan Hiller, *Measure by Measure*, 1973-ongoing. Paintings burnt annually, in glass burettes, on shelf.

I would like to stress a point that is often overlooked in the context of contemporary discussions about exhibitions. These discussions often suggest that art can exist even when it is not shown. The discussion of exhibition practice thus becomes a discussion of what is included and what is excluded by a certain exhibition – as if excluded artworks can somehow still exist somewhere, even when they are not shown. In some cases artworks can be stored or hidden

from the public view and still exist as they wait to be exhibited later. But in most cases, to not show an artwork simply means not allowing it to come into being at all.

Indeed, at least since Duchamp's readymades, artworks that only exist if they are exhibited have emerged. To produce an artwork means precisely to exhibit something as art – there is no production beyond exhibition. Yet when art production and exhibition coincide, the resulting works can very rarely begin to circulate on the art market. Since an installation, by definition, cannot circulate easily, it would follow that if installation art were not to be sponsored, it would simply cease to exist. We can now see a crucial difference between sponsoring an exhibition of, let's say, traditional art objects and sponsoring an exhibition of art installations. In the first case, without adequate sponsorship, certain art objects will not be made accessible to the wider public; nevertheless, these objects will still exist. In the second case, inadequate sponsorship would mean that the artworks, understood as art installations, would not come into being at all. And that would be a pity at least for an important reason: artistic and curatorial installations increasingly function as places that attract filmmakers, musicians, and poets who

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challenge the public taste of their time and cannot become a part of the commercialized mass culture. Philosophers, too, are discovering the art exhibition as a terrain for their discourses. The art scene has become a territory on which political ideas and projects that are difficult to situate in the contemporary political reality can be formulated and presented.

Public exhibition practice thus becomes a place where interesting and relevant questions concerning the relationship between art and money emerge. The art market is – at least formally – a sphere dominated by private taste. But what about the art exhibitions that are created for wider audiences? One repeatedly hears that the art market, distorted by the private taste of wealthy collectors, corrupts public exhibition practice. Of course, this is true in a sense. But then what is this uncorrupted, pure, public taste that is thought to dominate an exhibition practice that surpasses private interests? Is it a mass taste, a factual taste of wider audiences that is characteristic of our contemporary civilization? In fact, installation art is often criticized precisely for being “elitist,” for being an art that the wider audiences do not want to see. Now this argument – especially because it is so often heard – deserves careful



François Pinault posing in front of his art collection.

analysis. First of all, one has to ask: If installation art is elitist, what is the elite that is assumed to be the natural audience for this art?

In our society, if we speak about the elite, we understandably refer to the financial elite. Thus, if somebody suggests art to be “elitist,” it would seem to imply that this art is made for spectators coming from the affluent and privileged classes of our society. But, as I have already tried to show, the contrary is true in the context of installation art. Affluent, privileged art collectors buy expensive art objects that circulate in the international art market, and are not as interested in installation art, which functions primarily as part of public art exhibitions and cannot be easily sold. And it is usually the case that, after stating that advanced installation art is elitist, the responsible authorities will invite wealthy collectors to show their private collections inside a public space. The notion of the elite thus becomes completely confusing, for no one can understand who this “elite,” implied by accusations of elitism, is actually supposed to be.

In an attempt to clarify what people could mean by the word “elitist,” let us turn to Clement Greenberg’s essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), a text that became a well-known example of the so-called elitist attitude to art. Today, Greenberg is mostly remembered as a theoretician of modernist art who coined the concept of flatness, but “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” deals with another question: Who can financially support advanced art under the conditions of modern capitalism?

According to Greenberg, good avant-garde art tries to reveal the techniques that old masters used to produce their works. In this respect, an avant-garde artist can be seen as comparable to a well-trained connoisseur concerned less with the subject of an individual artwork – as Greenberg states, this subject is dictated to the artist mostly from the outside, by the culture in which the artist lives – than the artistic means through which the artist treats this subject. The avant-garde in this sense operates mainly by way of abstraction – removing the “what” of the artwork to reveal its “how.” Greenberg seems to assume that the connoisseurship enabling the spectator to be attentive to the purely formal, technical, and material aspects of the artwork is accessible only to members of the ruling class, to the people who “could command leisure and comfort that always goes hand-in-hand with cultivation of some sort.”<sup>1</sup> For Greenberg, that means that avant-garde art can only hope to get its financial and social support from the same “rich and cultivated” patrons that have historically

supported art. Avant-garde art thus remains attached to the bourgeoisie “by the umbilical cord of gold.”<sup>2</sup> These formulations stuck with many of Greenberg’s readers, and defined the reception and interpretation of his text.

But what makes Greenberg’s essay still interesting and relevant today is the fact that after stating his belief that only the “wealthy and educated” – that is, the elite in the traditional sense of the word – can be capable and willing to support avant-garde art, Greenberg immediately rejects this belief and explains why it is wrong. The historical reality of the 1930s brings Greenberg to the conclusion that the bourgeoisie is unable to provide a social basis for avant-garde art through its economic and political support. To maintain its real political and economic power under the conditions of modern mass society, the ruling elite must reject any notion or even any suspicion of having “elite taste” or supporting “elite art.” What the modern elite does not want is to be “elitist” – to be visibly distinguishable from the masses. Accordingly, the modern elite must erase any distinction of taste and create an illusion of aesthetic solidarity with the masses – a solidarity that conceals the real power structures and economic inequalities. As examples of this strategy, Greenberg cites the cultural policies of the Soviet Union under Stalin, of Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy. But he also suggests that the American bourgeoisie follows the same strategy of aesthetic solidarity with mass culture to prevent the masses from being able to visually identify their class enemy.

In applying Greenberg’s analysis to the current cultural situation, one can say that the contemporary elites collect precisely the art that they assume to be spectacular enough to attract the masses. This is why big private collections appear “non-elitist” and well-adjusted enough to become global tourist attractions whenever they are exhibited. We are living in a time in which elite taste and mass taste coincide. One should not forget that, in the current moment, significant wealth can only be gained by selling products with mass appeal. If contemporary elites suddenly become “elitist,” they will also lose touch with mass expectations in their business practices and, accordingly, lose their wealth. Thus, the question arises: How is something like “elitist” art possible under these conditions?

The same essay by Greenberg suggests an answer to this question. If the avant-garde is nothing other than an analysis of traditional art from its productivist side, then “elitist” art is the same as “art for artists” – that is, art made primarily for the producers of art and not exclusively for the consumers of art. Advanced

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art wants to demonstrate how art is made – its productive side, its poetics, the devices and practices that bring it into being. Greenberg gives avant-garde art a definition that casts it beyond any possible evaluation by taste, wither popular or elite. According to Greenberg, the ideal spectator of avant-garde art is less interested in it as a source of aesthetic delectation than as a source of knowledge – of information about art production, its devices, its media, and its techniques. Art ceases to be a matter of taste and becomes a matter of knowledge and mastery. In this sense, one can say that, as a modern technique, avant-garde art is, generally, autonomous – which is to say, independent of any individual taste. Therefore, artworks should be analyzed according the same criteria as objects like cars, trains, or planes. From this point of view, there is no longer a clear difference between art and design, between an artwork and a mere technical product. This constructivist, productivist point of view opens the possibility to see art not in the context of leisure and informed aesthetic contemplation, but in terms of production – that is, in terms that refer more to the activities of scientists and workers than to the lifestyle of the leisure class.



Fernand Léger, *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924. Film still of the mechanized, animated Chaplin which opens and closes the film.

In a later essay, “The Plight of Culture” (1953), Greenberg insists even more radically on this productivist view of culture. Citing Marx, Greenberg states that modern industrialism has devaluated leisure – even the rich must work, and are more proud of their achievements as they enjoy their leisure time. This is why Greenberg simultaneously agrees and disagrees with T. S. Eliot’s diagnosis of modern culture in his book from 1948, *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*. Greenberg concurs with Eliot that the traditional culture based on leisure and

refinement came into a period of decline when modern industrialization forced all people to work. But at the same time, Greenberg writes: “The only solution for culture that I conceive of under these conditions is to shift its center of gravity away from leisure and place it squarely in the middle of work.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the abandonment of the traditional ideal of cultivation through leisure seems to be the only possible way out of innumerable paradoxes that were produced by Greenberg’s attempt to connect this ideal with the concept of the avant-garde – the attempt that he undertook and then rejected in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” But even if Greenberg found this way out, he was too careful to follow it. He writes further about the proposed solution: “I am suggesting something whose outcome I cannot imagine.”<sup>4</sup> And further again:

Beyond such speculation, which is admittedly schematic and abstract, I cannot go. ... But at least it helps if we do not have to despair of the ultimate consequences for culture of industrialism. And it also helps if we do not have to stop thinking at the point where Spengler and Toynbee and Eliot do.<sup>5</sup>

It becomes obvious that when saying avant-garde art is “elitist,” what one actually means by the word “elite” is not the ruling and wealthy but the art producers – the artists themselves. It would follow that “elitist” art means that art which is made not for the appreciation of the consumers, but rather that of the artists themselves. Here we are no longer dealing with a specific taste – whether of the elite or of the masses – but with art for the artists, with art practice that surpasses taste. But would such an art that surpasses taste really be an “elitist” art? Or, put differently: Are artists really an elite? In a very obvious way, they are not, for they are simply not wealthy and powerful enough. But people who use the word “elitist” in relation to art produced for artists do not actually mean to suggest that artists rule the world. They simply mean that to be an artist is to belong to a minority. In this sense, “elitist” art actually means “minority” art. But are artists really such a minority in our contemporary society? I would say that they are not.

Perhaps this was the case in Greenberg’s time, but now it is not. Between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, art entered a new era – namely, an era of mass artistic production following an era of mass art consumption. Contemporary means of image production, such as video and cell phone cameras, as well as socially networked means of image distribution such as Facebook,

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Stephen Willats, *Metafilter*, 1973-5, Painted wood, Perspex, computer, slide projector and problem book. Collection of Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris



YouTube, and Twitter give global populations the possibility of presenting their photos, videos, and texts in a way that cannot be distinguished from any other post-conceptual artwork. And contemporary design gives the same populations the possibility of shaping and experiencing their own bodies, apartments, or workplaces as artistic objects and installations. This means that contemporary art has definitively become a mass cultural practice. Furthermore, it means that today's artist lives and works primarily among art producers – not among art consumers. Or, to use Greenberg's phrase, the artist is finally put squarely into the context of production. This places professional contemporary art outside the problem of taste, and even outside the aesthetic attitude as such.

Under these new social and economic circumstances, the artist should have no shame in presenting him- or herself as being interested in production and not consumption – as being an artist today means to belong not to a minority but to a majority of the population. Accordingly, an analysis of contemporary mass image production has to substitute the analysis of the art of the past as Greenberg theorized it. And this is precisely what contemporary professional artists do – they investigate and manifest mass art production, not elitist or mass art consumption.

The aesthetic attitude is, by definition, the consumer's attitude. Aesthetics, as a philosophical tradition and academic discipline, relates to and reflects on art from the perspective of the art consumer – the ideal art spectator. This spectator expects to receive the so-called aesthetic experience from art. At least since Kant, we know that the aesthetic experience can be an experience of beauty or of the sublime. It can be an experience of sensual pleasure. But it can also be an "anti-aesthetic" experience of displeasure, of frustration provoked by an artwork that lacks all the qualities that "affirmative" aesthetics expects it to have. It can be an experience of a utopian vision that leads humankind out of its present condition to a new society in which beauty reigns; or, in somewhat different terms, it can redistribute the sensible in a way that refigures the spectator's field of vision by showing certain things and giving access to certain voices that were earlier concealed or obscured. But it can also demonstrate the impossibility of providing positive aesthetic experiences in the midst of a society based on oppression and exploitation – on a total commercialization and commodification of art that, from the beginning, undermines the possibility of a utopian perspective. As we know, both of these seemingly contradictory aesthetic experiences

can provide equal aesthetic enjoyment. However, in order to experience aesthetic enjoyment of any kind the spectator must be aesthetically educated, and this education necessarily reflects the social and cultural milieu into which the spectator was born and in which he or she lives. In other words, the aesthetic attitude presupposes the subordination of art production to art consumption – and thus the subordination of art theory to sociology.

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Claes Oldenburg, *Vitello Tonnato*, 1962. Muslin on painted glazed clay on a dish.

In fact, the aesthetic attitude does not need art, and it functions much better without it. It is often said that all the wonders of art pale in comparison to the wonders of nature. In terms of aesthetic experience, no work of art can stand comparison to even an average beautiful sunset. And, of course, the sublime side of nature and politics can be fully experienced only by witnessing a real natural catastrophe, revolution, or war – not by reading a novel or looking at a picture. In fact, this was the shared opinion of Kant and the Romantic poets and artists that launched the first influential aesthetic discourses: the real world is the legitimate object of the aesthetic attitude (as well as of scientific and ethical attitudes) – not art. According to Kant, art can become a legitimate

object of aesthetic contemplation only if it is created by a genius – understood as a human embodiment of natural force. The professional art can only serve as a means of education in notions of taste and aesthetic judgment. After this education is completed, art can be, as Wittgenstein's ladder, thrown away – to confront the subject with the aesthetic experience of life itself. Seen from the aesthetic perspective, art reveals itself as something that can, and should be, overcome. All things can be seen from an aesthetic perspective; all things can serve as sources of aesthetic experience and become objects of aesthetic judgment. From the perspective of aesthetics, art has no privileged position. Rather, art comes between the subject of the aesthetic attitude and the world. A grown person has no need for art's aesthetic tutelage, and can simply rely on one's own sensibility and taste. Aesthetic discourse, when used to legitimize art, effectively serves to undermine it.

Our contemporary world, though, is primarily an artificially produced world – in other words, it is produced primarily by human work. However, even if today's wider populations produce artworks, they do not investigate, analyze, and demonstrate the technical means by which they produce them – let alone the economic, social, and political conditions under which images are produced and distributed. Professional art, on the other hand, does precisely that – it creates spaces in which a critical investigation of contemporary mass image production can be effectuated and manifested. This is why such a critical, analytical art should be supported in the first place: if it is not supported, it will be not only hidden and discarded, but, as I have already suggested, it would simply not come into being. And this support should be discussed and offered beyond any notion of taste and aesthetic consideration. What is at stake is not an aesthetic, but a technical, or, if you like, poetic, dimension of art.

A good object and example of such an investigation can be found in the poetics of the internet – the dominant medium of mass production in our time. The internet often seduces the average spectator – and even some serious theoreticians – to speak about immaterial production, immaterial workers, and so forth. And indeed, for someone sitting in an apartment, office, or studio looking at the screen of his or her personal computer, this screen presents itself as an opening, as a window into the virtual, immaterial world of pure, floating signifiers. Apart from the physical manifestations of fatigue that are inevitable after a few hours in front of the screen, the body of a person using the computer is of no consequence. As a computer user, one engrosses

oneself in solitary communication with the medium; one falls into a state of self-oblivion, an oblivion of one's body that is analogous to the experience of reading a book. But one is also oblivious to the material body of the computer itself, to the cables attached to it, the electricity it consumes, and so forth.

But the situation changes drastically if the same computer is placed in an installation, or, more generally, in an exhibition space. An art exhibition extends the attention and focus of the visitor. One no longer concentrates upon a solitary screen but wanders from one screen to the next, from one computer installation to another. The itinerary of the visitor within the exhibition space undermines the traditional isolation of the internet user. At the same time, an exhibition utilizing the web and other digital media renders visible the material, physical side of these media: their hardware, the stuff from which they are made. All of the machinery that enters the visitor's field of vision thus destroys the illusion that the digital realm is confined to the space of the screen.

The standard exhibition leaves an individual visitor alone, allowing him or her to individually confront and contemplate the exhibited art objects. Moving from one object to another, this visitor necessarily overlooks the totality of the exhibition space, including his or her own position within it. An art installation, on the contrary, builds a community of spectators precisely because of the holistic, unifying character of the space produced by the installation. The true visitor of the installation is not an isolated individual, but a collective of visitors. The art space as such can only be perceived by a mass of visitors – a multitude, if you like – and this multitude becomes part of the exhibition for each individual visitor, and vice versa. The visitor thus finds his or her own body exposed to the gaze of others, who in turn become aware of this body.

An exhibition that uses and thematizes digital equipment stages a social event, one that is material and not immaterial. The installation is frequently denied the status of a specific art form because it is not obvious what the medium of an installation actually is. Traditional artistic media are all defined by a specific material support: canvas, stone, or film. The material support of the installation medium is the space itself – though this is not to say that the installation is somehow "immaterial." On the contrary, the installation is material par excellence, because it is spatial – for being in space is the most general definition of being material. The installation transforms the empty, neutral public space into an individual artwork – and it invites the visitor to experience this space

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as the holistic, totalizing space of an artwork. Anything included in such a space becomes a part of the artwork simply because it is placed inside this space. One might then say that installation practices reveal the materiality and composition of the things of our world. Turning back to the beginning of my discussion, here lies the critical, enlightening character of truly contemporary art: while the commodities produced by our civilization circulate on the global markets according to their monetary and symbolic value – with their pure materiality manifesting, at best, through their private consumption – it is contemporary art alone that is able to demonstrate the materiality of the things of this world beyond their exchange value.

x

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Boris Groys (1947, East Berlin) is Professor of Aesthetics, Art History, and Media Theory at the Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe and Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. He is the author of many books, including *The Total Art of Stalinism*, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, *Art Power*, *The Communist Postscript*, and, most recently, *Going Public*.

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Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 543.

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3  
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