

Art in the After-Culture

Immersive van Gogh, anyone?
American critic Ben Davis tackles
capitalism's commodification of art.

by Sarah Swan

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I get grouchy fast when I try to think through questions about contemporary culture. And it's not just me. A recent headline in *The Atlantic* reads: "Why the past 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid." The article's author, Jonathan Haidt, an American social psychologist, blames social media for our new depths of idiocy. I blame immersive Vincent van Gogh experiences. I'm only partly joking.

Art in the age of social media has become more collaborative and democratic. Much innovation is happening via technology that bypasses galleries. But if these are gains, why do I feel a sense of loss? Is the art world thriving or is it dying? Does the glory of art belong to a former age or is a time yet to come?



Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis and Cultural Strategy, the latest book by American art critic Ben Davis, dissects “modes of cultural production and consumption” (yes, this includes immersive van Goghs) “consolidated in the wake of the last decade’s turbulence.”

Davis writes for *artnet News*, a global art market newswire. In 2019, Harvard’s *Nieman Journalism Lab* named Davis one of the five most influential art critics in the United States. His incisive book helps still the turbulence so I can see the issues more clearly. It allows me to navigate the ambiguities that often mire me.

Davis is no hand-wringer, though. He never romanticizes the way things were. Rather, in 11 essays, he explores the historical roots that have led us here to the entirely bewildering present moment. His tone is one of reckoning. He wrote the book, he says, for an audience located somewhere between creaking cultural institutions and volatile leftists.

While reading the book, I happened to watch American comedian Aziz Ansari’s latest Netflix special. Ansari encapsulates contemporary modes of cultural production and consumption perfectly. “Heyyy,” he asks, in mock-millennial upspeak. “... are you going to the event tonight? There’s going to be, like, a new pop-up for this collaboration that Travis Scott is doing with, like, Citibank and Chips Ahoy and they’re selling these limited edition Chips Ahoy designed by, like, emerging artists and whenever you go you get this limited-edition tote bag with this limited-edition T-shirt designed by these, like, eco-friendly emerging streetwear brands and when you come home, the tote bag, like turns into an NFT and, like, the NFT starts deejaying and it’s all sustainable.”

I laughed uncomfortably at Ansari. In the 1990s, I thought selling out was a heinous sin. But I certainly engage in brand worship now. I'm a follower of Nike and Adidas. Sneaker designers are the new abstract expressionists. Sneakers seduce me like those mid-century paintings once did. The borders between high culture and street culture, between art connoisseurship and brand strategy, have been erased. It's one world now. Should I mourn, or celebrate, or both?

In his book, Davis paints a fuller picture of capitalism's commodification of art. He begins with a sci-fi vision of the not-too distant future when art as we know it is rendered irrelevant by the rise of artificial intelligence. A few lucky artists remain, in roles similar to personal chefs or trainers, to "remind the ultrarich of their unique centeredness and humanity in the decentered and inhumane world that they have secured for themselves." Yikes. But his point is that the familiar ways art makes meaning have drastically changed. He discusses, for example, "context collapse" – how images float freely on the Internet, no longer tied to the circumstances of their origin.

His discussion about the aesthetics of artificial intelligence has deepened and informed my reactionary grouchiness. "The balance of forces between art and technology does not favor art," he says. And: "AI aesthetics are most effective where they are most convenient for capitalism." He reaffirms my conviction that art is a human endeavour, not a mechanical or algorithmic one, while prompting me to ask better questions. It's urgent, he says, "that the conversation move from whether (artificial intelligence) will create 'art' to what kind of art it will create and how it does or does not fit with what we want art to be."

Certain phrases created a palpable push in my thinking, especially where I tend to spin my tires. I'm often caught in ruts, defensive of my specialized art knowledge even as I criticize the art world's elitism. Immersive *Starry Night* paintings, for example, are good because they're accessible to the public. But they are also bad, mere eye-candy. By design, they require – and impart – little quality knowledge. Davis suggests thinking of immersive experiences as "para-artistic cultural attractions," which became a dominant art form in the second half of the 2010s and into the pandemic. Think of immersive experience companies as capitalist-driven big-box art.

Art in the After-Culture is an involved and heady read, but necessarily so. It's a relief to really grapple with things that matter, instead of relying on easy punditry and hot takes. The essay on how cultural appropriation relates to materialism and reacts to postmodernism is the most brilliant piece I've read in years. Davis has managed to slow down, for a moment, the debate's rapidly evolving terms. And his essay on conspiracy theories is weird, fascinating and humane.

Above all, this book gave me permission to lament what Davis calls the "demotion of contemplation." To borrow from his metaphor, the most hopeful vision of art in the future is one of malfunctioning robots, glitching algorithms and deflating hubris. ■

***Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis and Cultural Strategy*, by Ben Davis: Haymarket Books, 2022.**



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