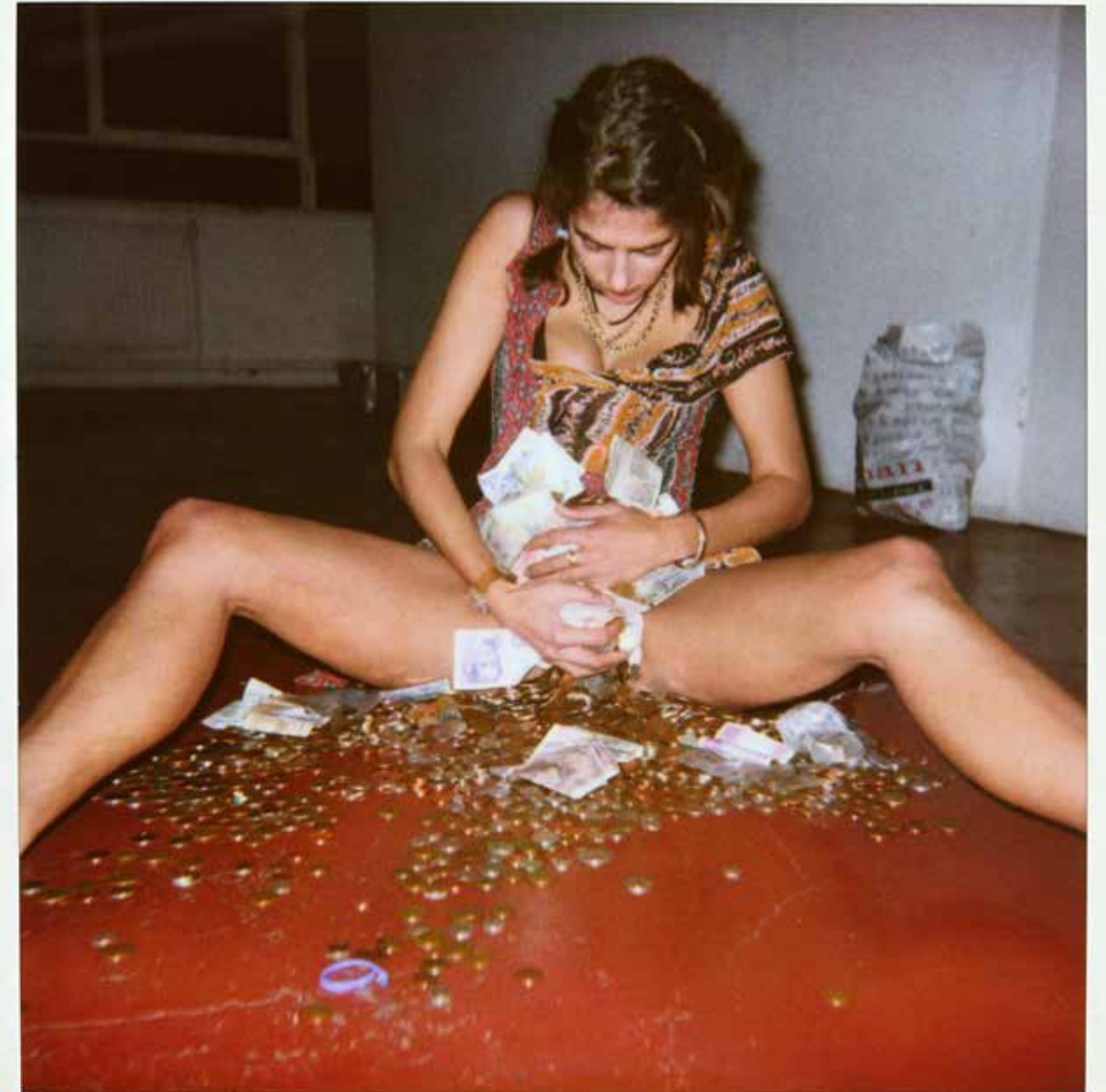


A CHAT WITH BEN DAVIS

Marcus Civin caught up with art critic Ben Davis, having found his new book *Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis and Cultural Strategy* extraordinary. Davis's earnest belief in art and art-writing was evident throughout their conversation. "There are all these countries, including here in the United States, where a right-wing [person] comes to power and then suddenly those liberal, fuzzy, cultural spaces come under attack," Davis asserts. "Suddenly you have to rally people to defend those spaces, and it's not going to help if you've already been saying they're worthless." Presented here are a few outtakes from their chat.



Tracey Emin, *I've got it all [J'ai tout ce qu'il faut]*, 2000
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Marcus Civin: There's a graph that appears at the beginning of *Art in the After-Culture*, illustrating the intersections and divisions that can emerge between the terms *industry, art, connoisseur, and consumer...* Can you talk us through this graph?

Ben Davis: Art is an invented category that people talk about as if it's obvious what it is, but it's a bucket you can put different things into. People aren't using the word to designate the same thing. These new phenomena seem to me almost like experiments. Whether it's NFTs or Artificial Intelligence, they seem to ask: "How many of the elements that we associate with art can we just remove and still have something that is generally in the region of culture?" The languages people use to talk about art are breaking apart into separate experiences.

A big thing that I am thinking about in the book is how you can't solve a lot of the problems people have with the art world, on an intellectual or stylistic level. One tension [present] in culture is the dumbing down or flattening of things to the lowest common denominator or the most massified version. You can accurately connect that back to your alienation from capitalism because market dynamics are causing that to happen. You can see it in the art market, particularly right now. You've got a lot of people who identify the art world as [being] snooty or elite and will accurately have the impulse that is connected to class. Whatever the thrill is that people get out of art, some of it is that these are objects where people can exercise their cultural capital, have a sense of themselves, like: "I'm the type of person who can decode this relatively esoteric thing."

I'm trying to picture for people, that we're caught between a bunch of connected positions that define themselves against each other. In

my opinion, the process of art criticism is less like digging up a treasure, where there's a 'right' answer that we're discovering; and more like steering a ship, where there are changes in the weather and you're constantly figuring out how to move forward. At different points and in different cultural experiences, you'll have to be shifting more in one direction or another [in order] to advance. That's what I'm trying to provide a visual of, the points on the map you're navigating around.

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MC: Do you want to say more about AI, since it seems to be on everyone's mind now?

BD: The problem with AI, like a lot of our technological conversations, is the logic of consumerism that undergirds it. Essentially, these are godlike powers that are treated as a toy or novelty. "With great power comes great responsibility," as Spiderman's uncle said. We need to treat AI like that. There are useful and interesting applications of AI that come with huge potential social costs, and there is no collective means to mediate what we're willing to sacrifice or what we might be sacrificing at this moment. The point of my AI chapter in the book is to do justice to the creativity of the technology. It is terrifyingly creative, and I think the AI conversation inherits [our current position] in a world in which technology and science are the only source of prestige and have become

the centre of culture. With all of this AI-generated art, we are just flooded with junk. It is extremely difficult to use this technology to make anything creative that has social traction. Becoming an artist is a second layer. It's not just, "Did I make something that momentarily engaged people?" It's, "How do I speak from my position as an individual with creative subjectivity, to other people's concerns, or start a conversation. That was the big question before AI. In the last ten years, the terrain of expression has become so commodified that culture doesn't feel meaningful to people. Before AI there was so much culture and not enough people talking about it. This accelerates that. AI gives you a good enough substitute for a creative experience of self, but I contend that it accelerates the alienation that's already there. <

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