

FINE ART CAPITALISM Q&A

How Bleak Is the Future of the Art World?

*A conversation with critic Ben Davis about making art amid global crisis, fine art's waning relevance, and his recent book *Art in the After-Culture*.*

By Naomi Elias

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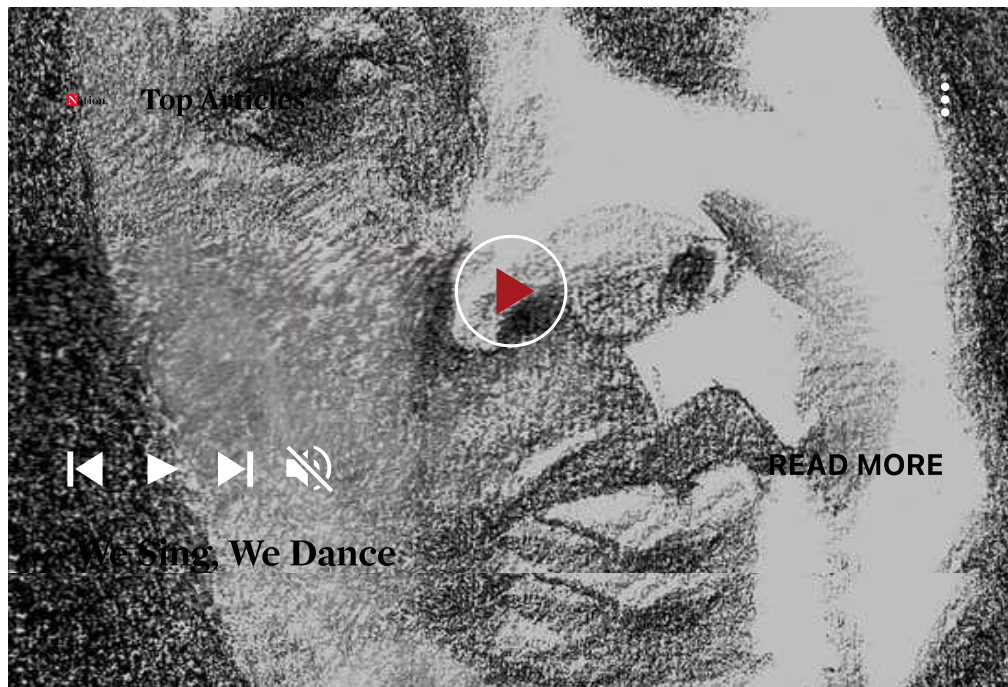
A man dressed up as astronaut stands outside the Museum of Ice Cream in New York City, 2016. (Photo by Kena Betancur / Getty Images)

While the goings-on of the art world might appear to be a secondary concern amid the various crises of capitalism we face, in *Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis*

and Cultural Strategy, critic Ben Davis exposes the crucial ways art can absorb, reflect, and suffer from our system's flaws. Davis—who is currently the national art critic for *Artnet*—uses the book's eight essays to historicize and elucidate the balance of forces between art and capitalism. He muses on the way subjects like the overlapping cataclysms of climate change, the rise of conspiracy culture and AI-based art, and galvanizing social movements like Standing Rock and Black Lives Matter have posed new challenges to the ways we create and consume visual art. “The stakes are high for art,” Davis states plainly of the current state of the field, which he feels must “make the case for itself in a collapsing cultural space.”

I spoke with Davis to hear his thoughts on what it means to make art during a time in which we seem to be experiencing an inexorable decline in cultural matters and what artists can still achieve in telling in effect the story of the future.

—Naomi Elias



NAOMI ELIAS: What is the “after-culture”? The book starts off with a hypothetical and comically dire vision of the future of art, set in the future. Can you explain that concept, and why it’s the entry point for this book?

BEN DAVIS: Well, there are two answers to that. It’s a collection of essays, but it’s framed by these science fiction vignettes. As you say, the first one is this dystopian, worst-case scenario for what art looks like in the near future, an after-culture. If things go the way that they look like they’re going, this is what art is going to look like after.

I have a section about how dystopian our cultural imagination is, right now, and another section, on the power that utopian thinking has had for left-wing thought, later in the book. The first editor who looked at the book said, “Your book kind of replicates this structure, because your picture of the future is very dystopian.” I thought about that, and then I wrote the second vignette, which is another picture of the after-culture. Not the best-case scenario, but the best case I can credibly imagine for a better outcome for art. The “after-culture” is kind of a blanket term, but there’s something coming—art and culture are connected to the material infrastructures of our society, which have a certain kind of trajectory. What the “after” is, is kind of up to us, and I hope that the book captures some of that idea.

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In my last book, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, I wrote an essay called “The Semi-Post-Postmodern Condition.” In that piece I write about how, when I was learning about cultural theory, “postmodernism” was this hot framework, and in the 2010s it was already pretty clear that the term had gone out of vogue. But for me, the idea of “postmodernism” was always that there was no big story out there, no real politics on the grand scale to believe in. All we had was very self-interested, self-directed micro-narratives. When I was writing that essay I was saying, people may not use that term anymore but, basically, we’re all still stuck in the logic of “there’s no real future”: we’re in kind of an eternal present. Until we actually have some bigger stories that glue people together, close to the center of intellectual life, we should just admit that we’re still kind of in the “postmodern” condition.

For me, *Art in the After-Culture* is my attempt to think through how things have changed in the last decade, which is, I think, exactly the reverse from then. Big stories are back. We are in a different intellectual moment where people are wrestling around over big narratives again, the biggest one of all being the climate crisis. The end of the world is pretty much the biggest master narrative that you can imagine. We’re in a new period that we’re still figuring out because it is a moment of these big, inchoate stories duking it out and forming a new kind of intellectual texture. Which, exactly, of those will dominate is TBD.

NE: You got into my other question, which was about how you mention critic Raymond Williams’s theory that different historical periods have different defining

“structures of feeling.” I was going to ask you how you’d characterize the structure of feeling for the current moment.

BD: One of the alternative titles for this book was *Culture Collapse*, but my publisher thought that sounded too conservative. I talk about this in the book’s introduction, but I do feel this sense of collapse, in fact, which is not one thing. It’s a bunch of different pressures coming together. It’s hard to overstate how unequal things are now, and that degree of out-of-jointness in society, particularly in the arts, really means that culture feels crushed beneath that weight.

There’s been a tremendous speed-up in the circulation of culture and in the circulation of narratives about culture. You don’t just have commentary on new art. You have commentary on the commentary on the commentary of new art. Also, this has been a very politically volatile time. The spectacle and urgency of politics have sort of meant that a lot of thought and writing about what it means to make art, right now, has been flattened or collapsed to its political dimension.

NE: There is definitely a more urgent moral dimension to our art consumption nowadays. In the book there’s a statistic about how the term “cultural appropriation” trends higher in web searches than “postmodernism.” But you also point out how morality has been corporatized and metabolized into “lifestyle capitalism.” You examine, for example, a time in the postwar era when certain critics framed the radical as “chic,” which is not dissimilar to criticism of “woke” art now. Can you explain what you were doing with that comparison?

BD:There's a renaissance in left culture, right now. I think everybody feels that its reference points, or how to move forward, are a little unclear and thwarted. I, in my little domain, which is this weird quirky arts sphere, am trying to think about that problem. There is a kind of narrative in art history about the legacy of the 1960s, and the legacy of conceptual art. People don't really always remember that the legacy of conceptual art was originally very political. It was all about incorporating new kinds of material that didn't come from a higher tradition, and reaching new kinds of audiences who might not have been located in a traditional museum or gallery. That became a tradition of institutional critique that has become more, if not mainstream, then at least accepted in the contemporary art world.

A few years ago, the common-sense proposition was that if you were an art person, then critical art is what you looked toward, politically critical art. There's been a pretty sharp turn and critique of that in recent years. As I look back on art history, there's this horrifying realization that mainstream arts and culture have become more and more, let's say, if not left, then progressive in their ideology. Openly, these are progressive spaces at the same time that there was neoliberalism, at the same time that the world became more unequal, politics became more right-wing. You have to sync those two things together and try to figure out what that means. Where are the places where it's okay in society to be openly a lefty, openly a Marxist even, openly an anarchist? Certain parts of academia, certain parts of the culture industry, certain parts of the nonprofit complex. If you look at all these three things together, they're all nonprofit spaces. What does that mean?

Profit is the central motive of capitalism. Essentially, the process of the last, let's say, 40, 50 years has been quarantining left-wing stuff, concentrating it in the places that are furthest from the profit nexus of society. Thinking through that contradiction— what does it mean for contemporary politics that you have these traditions that you want to support, but that they're bottled up in those spaces, and how do you approach that in a way that's critical and strategic? That's the project of the book in my head.

NE: You also write about how there's a growing movement to hold museums accountable; repatriation efforts for cultural artifacts that were looted, and some people calling for the abolition of museums altogether. You bring up Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* controversy regarding depictions of Emmett Till as a case study that divided the art world in 2017 and raised questions of what artists are allowed to depict, and what a museum's role is in mediating that. By now, we're all, obviously, familiar with that "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism" line, but is there even ethical art under capitalism, and are these the right questions to be asking, do you think?

BD: It's kind of the wrong question because nothing's ethical under capitalism. The system is self-destructive. There's a tremendous moralism to a lot of recent writing about art. I'm trying to step back from it and provide more of a materialist explanation for why the conversation has taken the turn that it has. But holding museums accountable, asking questions about who gets to make culture, who funds culture, these are really exciting things. These are questions that are a really

long time in coming. If you look at my last book, I sort of predicted how this wave was going to break, and now it has broken. The question is what the *goal* is.

My assessment is that this has been a cul-de-sac or trap that a lot of left-wing thought has been led into. It has been focused in these institutions that are furthest from the centers of power. What is the end of the politics that's coming out of this? Is it just a new form of cultural institution or is it to connect what's going on inside those compromised institutions with political movements outside of them, to change them? A lot of politics within culture becomes very circular, very much a conversation with itself. What we need to do is open these circuits up to movements that are outside of culture.

NE: I want to circle back to what you were saying about profitability and museums. In recent years, big institutions have been yoked to what you call “Big Fun Art,” like the popular immersive Van Gogh installation touring nationwide. You also talk about how we live in an attention economy and that has fundamentally changed how we engage with art. What do you make of the advent of “art experiences”?

BD: It's the flip side of the politicization of the arts sphere. On the one hand, all acts of cultural consumption have become really politicized. Your cultural consumption is a big running dialogue about where you stand politically. On the other hand, new forms of cultural consumption of art have sprung up that are completely unhooked from that. It's really striking that these things happened in the same time period, because the year of, for instance, the Dana Schutz

controversy and a bunch of other big art controversies that changed the texture of how people talked about art was the same year as the explosion of Big Fun Art.

These are two halves of the same picture about how the attention economy has changed the way we think about things. The acceleration of information about art has changed the way we think about these things. There's a lot of anxiety in museums now. Museums are past the point where they're not taking pop-up, commercialized, immersive art phenomena seriously. Until very recently, people were like, "This is just a fad. We're going to hold the line for 'serious culture.'" But it's pretty clear that it's a serious phenomenon. It's a new way that people have found to engage with art. The contribution of this book when it comes to that question is to historicize it.

As you say, I do a lot of looking back to previous moments in art for guidance in the political realm and in terms of just the history of formal innovation. It's striking to me that a lot of people look at immersive Van Gogh or the Museum of Ice Cream or any of these things as silly, stupid, frivolous, populist things that they can safely dismiss. When you look back at some of what people were promising for art in terms of finding new audiences or in terms of conceptual art, in terms of how the documentation of an artwork was on the same level as the experience of the thing itself, these immersive Instagram trap environments are organically doing that. They are realizing some of the utopian promises that were made for art in the '60s without the utopian part.

The big project of the '60s art worlds was to smash elitism, and now we live in a fully populist art environment where the line between high culture and low culture still exists, but it's really, really porous and movable. I don't see what's going to stop it from growing without the social institutions of art really sharpening their focus on what they offer. What is their cultural value that they uniquely advance? Without people knowing it, a lot of what people thought was this special program of art has unconsciously been taken over by these things that kind of look like art, kind of look like an amusement park.

NE: I bring it up because one of the main assertions in the book is that art is experiencing this crisis of relevance. You write that art feels both more visible and more peripheral than ever. I was hoping you'd explain that sentiment. A lot of people's reactions to Big Fun Art is that it makes art feel irrelevant or less special. But others feel that democratizing access to art actually made it more inviting.

BD: A lot of things come down to contradictions. My way of thinking about things is that you want to look at the contradiction head-on rather than trying to resolve it. The most important thing to me is to take these things seriously. Certainly, the fact that things are popular doesn't make them good. It doesn't mean that they're going to be around for a long time, but I do think that it makes them meaningful. We should try and figure out what they're doing.

There's something about the contemporary moment of culture collapse or whatever you want to call it that, at ever greater levels, the way information circulates now has made it more and more difficult for people to distinguish what's

merely popular from what is good just on a critical level because the velocity of attention is so high. What I think Big Fun Art shows you is how the way people think about the arts and culture has already changed. Museums already encourage audiences to think about art as something that's extremely merchandisable, that you buy the poster for, essentially, a photo opportunity.

The last thing I'll say about this is something I get from Raymond Williams and his essay, "Culture Is Ordinary," which I quote in the book: You have to take people's cultural consumption seriously. Something that you think looks dumb might actually fulfill a deep need. People know what they need. Doesn't mean they always get what they need, but they're looking for something they need. A lot of people look at made-for-Instagram environments as kind of brainless. I see some of the same, but I also think to myself, "What is it about the contemporary environment that would lead people of all kinds to want an experience where they turn their brain off?" The truth is that we live in a time of tremendous anxiety and depression for really good reasons.

There's a constant trap in art criticism to be setting yourself up as the person who knows better rather than the person who's in dialogue with these phenomena and trying to figure out what they offer. What they offer is a certain sense of social connectivity that is a symptom of a cultural world that's really anxiety riddled and in desperate need of affirmative spaces. You may not like the way that manifests itself in popular culture, but you should take it really seriously.

Naomi Elias is a writer based in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Longreads*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere.

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