



ArtSeen

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The Experimental Laboratory of the Present

by Ben Davis

Answering the question of what a better art world would look like is both easy and hard.

It's easy because the problems with the art world are, in the end, pretty clear and not so tough to define. There's too much dumb money chasing too much dumb art; too much attention given to the few hundred or so stars who make a living off their art and almost none given to the rest; too many events thrown just to flatter the egos of the worst kind of people—oil oligarchs, financial sharks, arms dealers.

Thinking of modest but serious alternatives to this situation is also not so hard. You need to support artist cooperatives and alternative associations to give a purchase to art outside the commercial gallery scene. You need critics and curators to take seriously championing art that emerges from unexpected channels, that maybe doesn't even look like art yet. You need robust public support for nonprofit institutions to cut against the dominance of the super-rich, perhaps funded by a tax on art buying.

But the question is hard too—at least if you don't want to get stuck in imaginary territory. It's hard because the state of the art world as we find it is not purely a matter of lack of will for things to be different. The super-rich have actually grown much more rich and powerful in the recent past (under Bush and even more dramatically under Obama, incidentally). That means that their hold over the art world, the media, the government, and the economy in general is more consolidated than ever. You can't expect it to change the course of things without tackling the underlying fact of dramatically increasing inequality.

I'm not big on offering exact blueprints for a perfect future. What a better future will look like, for artists as for everyone else, will be worked out in the great experimental laboratory of the present. However, I know what I would advocate for people who are concerned about the problem. For the future to take a turn in a better direction the decisive ingredient is *solidarity*. Solidarity of artists for one another, but mainly solidarity of artists with other social struggles, in

whatever form that might take. A better art world requires a better world in general, and so the fight for a better world is the best and only real remedy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BEN DAVIS is an art critic living in New York. His book *9.5 Theses on Art and Class and Other Writings* is forthcoming from Haymarket.

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