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The Two Cultures of Contemporary Art

Language

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Lady Gaga's "ARTPOP" album cover, by Jeff Koons

by Ben Davis

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Last month, the performer Mike Daisey delivered a [riveting, free-associative monologue](#) at Joe's Pub, part of his "[All the Faces of the Moon](#)" series, about life in New York and the state of the performing arts. Attendance for live theater in the United States, he explained to his audience, has dropped by a third in a decade. "There's a word for that," Daisey said. "It's 'catastrophe.'"

Daisey is a compelling performer. I expect he's more careful with his facts since his "[Whoops-I-Fooled-This American Life](#)" moment last year. Still, I went to check the source, and found the [New York Times article](#) he was referring to. "You might not know it from the sold-out crowds at Broadway's big-budget musicals like 'The Book of Mormon' or 'Wicked,'" it begins, "but theater is the artistic discipline in America that is losing audience share at the fastest rate in recent years." In fact, digging deeper, when it comes to Broadway theater in particular, attendance is at what [another report calls](#) a "long-term high," fed by the city's tourism machine (touring shows are another matter).

As I thought about this divergence of fortunes, I started wondering if something similar might not be afoot in contemporary art. “Really, there are only two categories: ‘straight plays’ and then ‘musicals,’” Daisey said. “One has music and singing and a very specific form, and then there’s ‘*everything else*.’” He was making fun of the categories — but visual art doesn’t even have that provisional level of clarity. And it’s possible that distinguishing between the “Broadway musical” form of contemporary art and “everything else” would actually help explain an otherwise confusing state of affairs.

For, on the one hand, art has never been more comfortably a part of the pop culture mainstream. Jay Z [raps about wanting to own a Koons](#), while Lady Gaga, as if to one-up him, [wants to actually become a Koons](#). In August, the *Wall Street Journal*’s Kelly Crow wrote about the “[Attack of the Giant Art Galleries](#),” describing the new breed of cavernous art spaces designed to house the massive new artworks favored by the market and the crowds drawn to them. The lines at MoMA and the Met [have never been longer](#).

Yet at the same time, smaller galleries [talk about declining foot traffic](#) and [wonder if it’s even worth it](#) to maintain a physical space. And the same kinds of studies [that Daisey cites](#) with regard to theater also show that overall museum and gallery attendance in the United States has been in long-term decline, shedding about 2.5 million visitors since 2003, going from over 33 million to about 30.5 million in 2011, even as the country’s population *grew* by more than 20 million. So what’s going on? How do you explain this?

The contemporary art blockbuster show is a relatively new phenomenon. The original notion of “blockbusterization” in museums, born of the funding crisis in the 1970s and early fears about a waning audience, was something rather different: Museums had been sturdy, largely static storehouses of art-historical treasures; henceforth they would feature expensive temporary shows, lavishly promoted, and usually focused on well-established art figures who guaranteed some level of public curiosity. The first big one was Thomas Hoving’s legendary King Tut show. Cézanne, Picasso, and Van Gogh are the kinds of names you associate with this trend. Sticking with the theater parallel, you might think of such old-school blockbuster exhibitions as the museum-world equivalents of casting productions of *As You Like It* or *The Cherry Orchard* with movie stars: the classics, but injected with mass-culture growth hormones.

But the kind of blockbuster extravaganza that has recently overtaken visual art represents something else, some kind of demon confluence of the expanded possibilities of “post-studio” practice, high-wattage “new media” art, and a supercharged amplification of “relational aesthetics.” In New York, people wait in line for [Christian Marclay’s “The Clock,”](#) for Marina Abramovic’s “The Artist Is Present,” for [Maurizio Cattelan’s gargantuan mobile](#) or [Carsten Holler’s groovy slides](#), for [Doug Wheeler’s breathtaking “Infinity Room”](#) or [James Turrell’s underwhelming Guggenheim spectacle](#), for the [Restoration Hardware-backed “Rain Room” experience at the MoMA](#). The formula for the traditional blockbuster was art-historical cachet plus hype; the new formula is media-friendly engineering plus hype.

Clearly, this turn is producing some kind of tension for critics, most of whom are not the fans of Koonsian values that Jay Z and Lady Gaga are. Last year, Ossian Ward had [a great piece](#) in *Art in America* looking at the plague of Bigness in museums; he calls it the “Turbine Hall Effect,” after the

cavernous display space at the Tate Modern, and notes the ever-greater pressure to compete on that level. In an [opinion piece for the *New York Times* recently](#), Judith H. Dobrynski quoted MoMA head Glenn D. Lowry declaring that museums must shift “from art that is hanging on the wall to art that invites people to become part of it.” She lamented that this drive was bulldozing the subtler traditional values associated with museums (“solace and inspiration”).

Rebutting Dobrynski, DeCordova Sculpture Park director Dennis Kois [argued](#) that traditional artistic fare and the vogue for “experience”-driven art needn’t be mutually exclusive — which is true to a point. But it’s not all one big happy rainbow, either. Blockbuster contemporary environments favor different kinds of spaces, spaces that crush conventional painting and sculpture (which is one reason why, Crow points out, mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth has kept its more intimate uptown space while also converting a Chelsea roller rink into a new art palace). And it requires a different critical language: To say that [Damien Hirst’s](#) Brobdingnagian metal fetuses, just unveiled in Qatar, are about “[the complex relationship between art, love, life and death](#)” is to use a vocabulary inherited from the tradition of Pieta and *momento mori* in a context where it makes no sense. It is simply not a way to describe the work’s virtues, if you are going to argue for them. It’s like saying that *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* is about “exploring the relationship between the human and the machine.”

As the Lowry quote indicates, the turn to big, participatory environments appears to be a pragmatic attempt by museums to compete for attention in a very, very competitive media environment.

Attendance trends appear to confirm its wisdom. Kois argues that such work is just the latest turn in a history of art-historical reinvention. That’s possible — but I’ll throw something out there and say that the transformation of one wing of contemporary art into adult theme park design may be a more significant development than many of the ruptures that art historians make a big to-do about (though it builds on lots of them). It changes the entire assumed audience and thus the entire conversation around art.

What are blockbuster art’s native values? Mainly shock (Hirst, or [Paul McCarthy’s NC-17 fairy tale at the Armory](#)) and awe (Koons, or [Ai Weiwei’s mind-blowing carpet of ceramic sunflower seeds at the Tate](#)). But just as there is no reason to think that a big-budget Broadway spectacle or Hollywood blockbuster can’t be subversive or interesting in some way, there’s no reason to think that Big Art can’t be meaningful. The giant budgets and ultra-public nature of the work likely make this feat harder to pull off, practically. In fact, the cumbersomeness of the whole Hollywood filmmaking enterprise as a vehicle for personal inspiration is why a legendary figure like David Lynch [has decided of late to focus on painting instead](#). That’s a reminder that the locavore pleasures of traditional art practice — painting, drawing, and all that — still have their place, in spite or maybe even because of the tide of Bigness overtaking the world.

Since the trend has been a general sizing-up rather than a discrete new movement, it’s hard to sum up contemporary blockbuster art in one term. I’ve started playing with “superart,” which to me suggests a kind of intensification of some aspects of what we think of as art into a whole new thing. In any case, there is no reason you can’t enjoy both types of experience, or that both can’t live together. But they *are* worth categorically distinguishing in some way, because it’s very possible that one might be in rude health, while the other faces, if not “catastrophe,” then some real difficulties. That’s something worth really thinking about.

[Interventions](#), [Ben Davis](#)

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