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## American Art and Its Market

### Aging Gracefully or a Culture in Decline?



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (USA Today)* (1990) © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery

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## Art and national identity

Art has never been central to the cultural fabric of this nation, nor to most Americans' lives. Any sense of a national cultural identity comes through the ad hoc development of pop culture—the movies; rock and roll; youth culture.

The United States was founded on notions of independence and freedom—the ability to realize one's individual potential through hard work and entrepreneurial acumen. Art has often been peripheral to this, which has made it easy to undermine, to portray it as divisive and removed, to mock, demonize, and weaponize.

Had some titan filled this country with art museums 150 years ago, as did Andrew Carnegie with libraries, art might now be central to American experience. (Then again, given the current decline in literacy and general intelligence in this country, maybe not.)

## Collecting in the USA

The reason why this country has become the epicenter of the art market for the past 70 years is because the majority of the buyers have been based here, as well as the majority of the artists they have been collecting. For many decades now, it has been natural for new buyers in this country to begin by collecting new art—that of their generation.

Indeed, the values of "The New" in art, and the spirit of modern life that it reflects, are perfectly in sync with the modern, experimental nature of this multicultural nation and its endless fascination with fresh starts. (Conversely, the current disintegration of the American Dream is resulting in increasingly reactionary, violent and xenophobic urges for a kind of American homogeneity that denies both our history and the composition of our peoples.)

Typically, most new collectors approach contemporary art as a means of assimilation. Learning through trial and error, they tend to wind up with collections that mirror those of their more seasoned peers. Those who catch the collecting bug with the greatest gusto tend, whether consciously or not, to evolve their collection as a kind of self-portraiture—as unique as a strand of DNA—so that it moves in directions beyond the latest top 20.

In terms of new wealth creation, China is today what the United States was in the 1980s. As the largest new population of art buyers, China may well be on the precipice of forming a major art market center, which will inevitably identify its own tastes, priorities and styles of collecting. If they do it well, with the amount of capital they have the capacity to designate for art collecting, China could well change the face of collecting for the next half century, as this country did more than a half century ago.

## The New

The evolution of Modern Art has always been defined by The New. By the time the avant-garde reached a natural exhaustion point through Minimalism and the impulse of abstraction to reduce the work of art to its essential elements; and through Conceptual Art, which took the object out of the picture altogether, the idea of The New as a fertile laboratory of ideas began to lose its life force.

With this, we lost the criteria through which we typically measured the health of contemporary art with each successive new generation. It is not coincidental that this occurred as the art market rose to become a central force in defining value in art, fulfilling the perception of art as a commodity. As The New has become commercialized and mainstreamed, it has become less of a vital artistic spawning ground.

The other major reason for the diminished veneration of The New in the 1980s in the United States was the onset of AIDS, which destroyed a whole generation of new creative voices, most of whom didn't live long enough to fully form their artistic visions. Suddenly in America—a country so young itself and so wedded to the concepts of self-invention and reinvention—youth became equated with death. A decade which was defined at the beginning by virile Neo-Expressionist painting, which became larger and more self-confident as it became more successful in the mid-1980s, ended with introspective sculptures made on an intimate scale and focused on mortality and the articulation of the inner self (such as works by Robert Gober), and small paintings made of intentionally tentative gestures and imagery of unidentifiable origin (such as the work of Luc Tuymans).

## Breaking the addiction to The New



Bruce Nauman, *Human Nature/Life Death/ Knows Doesn't Know* (1983) © 2017 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

By the end of the 20th-century, even as demand grew, The New was losing its prescience. I remember a Whitney Biennial in 1997 when the three most potent, original and daring works were made by the three oldest artists in the exhibition: Paul McCarthy, Bruce Nauman and Louise Bourgeois.

Some collectors began to realize that art by the recently old was often cheaper, more proven and more fulfilling to continue to own. Since then, the pursuit of collecting The New has been in a state of panic. Promising emerging art continues to be made and engaging voices continue to appear, but as the market for contemporary art has broadened so dramatically, demand is focusing less on untested artists because they are creating truly original art than because money needs to be invested somewhere. This, rather than curatorial acumen, drives the short-term and often short-lived success of much of The New.

Sometimes, it seems as though the tail is wagging the dog: that a younger generation of artists schooled as much in career as in content, concept and process are making art for a hungry market, while the market forces up prices for the work of untested artists out of the need for more product. The result has been greater volatility.

### **The conundrum of American in American art**



Installation view of “America Is Hard to See”, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (May 1—September 27, 2015). From left to right: Claes Oldenburg, *Giant Fagends* (1967); Andy Warhol, *Before and After, 4* (1962); Marisol, *Women and Dog* (1963-64); Malcolm Bailey *Untitled, 1969* (1969); Allan D’Arcangelo, *Madonna and Child* (1963); Jasper Johns *Three Flags* (1958). Photo credit Ronald Amstutz

We have never really come to grips with American art and what it means. That’s partly because our idea of what American means is ongoing and evolving. The diversification of museums in this country took place because the Metropolitan Museum didn’t want to collect The New, so the patrons who wanted to foreground it established the Museum of Modern Art in 1929 (reinforcing the fact that some of the greatest achievements in The New have been created not in times of plenty but in times of adversity).

That year the sculptor and arts patron Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney had offered more than 500 works by living American artists and a building to house them to the Met, which refused the gift. So she set up her own museum, which opened two years later: the Whitney Museum of American Art, which later moved to the legendary Marcel Breuer building (which is now, somewhat ironically, being used by the Met to build up its program for contemporary art that it had previously had little art historical interest in nurturing).

In the 1930s American vanguard art was running a distant second to the European abstraction that informed it. It needed a museum of American art to make it visible and to give it a safe zone in which to be honored and evolve. As the Whitney moved forwards it has, in recent decades, struggled with what it means to be a museum of American art. This was less an issue in the 1960s and 1970s, when most of what was great in new art seemed to be American (even if that wasn’t, in hindsight, totally accurate), than in the 1980s, when contemporary art began to thrive on a more transatlantic model.

Since then, there have been a number of occasions when it has been debated—on an artistic, curatorial, and board level—whether to drop the “American” in the Whitney’s name, out of fear that its national identity may be too provincializing. Now though, in its new location downtown (not far from its original location), the “of American Art” is a large part of what gives this vital institution its unique identity in a landscape of so many major Modern art museums.

## New York

I didn’t understand how different New York is from the rest of the country until I started traveling to Europe in my late teens and met other American travelers. “Are you American?” they would ask with great enthusiasm, seeking cultural communion. For the most part, these were people I felt no kinship with. “I’m a New Yorker,” I would respond. This wasn’t out of arrogance: I just felt estranged from that kind of bonding patriotism that tends to be exclusionary, and therefore alien to me (and, in a sense, un-American).

It’s not that Europe seemed like my long lost homeland either—I actually feel very much American, but in a liberal, progressive, melting-pot, immigrant New York kind of way. Which, outside New York, it turns out, is not so American after all.

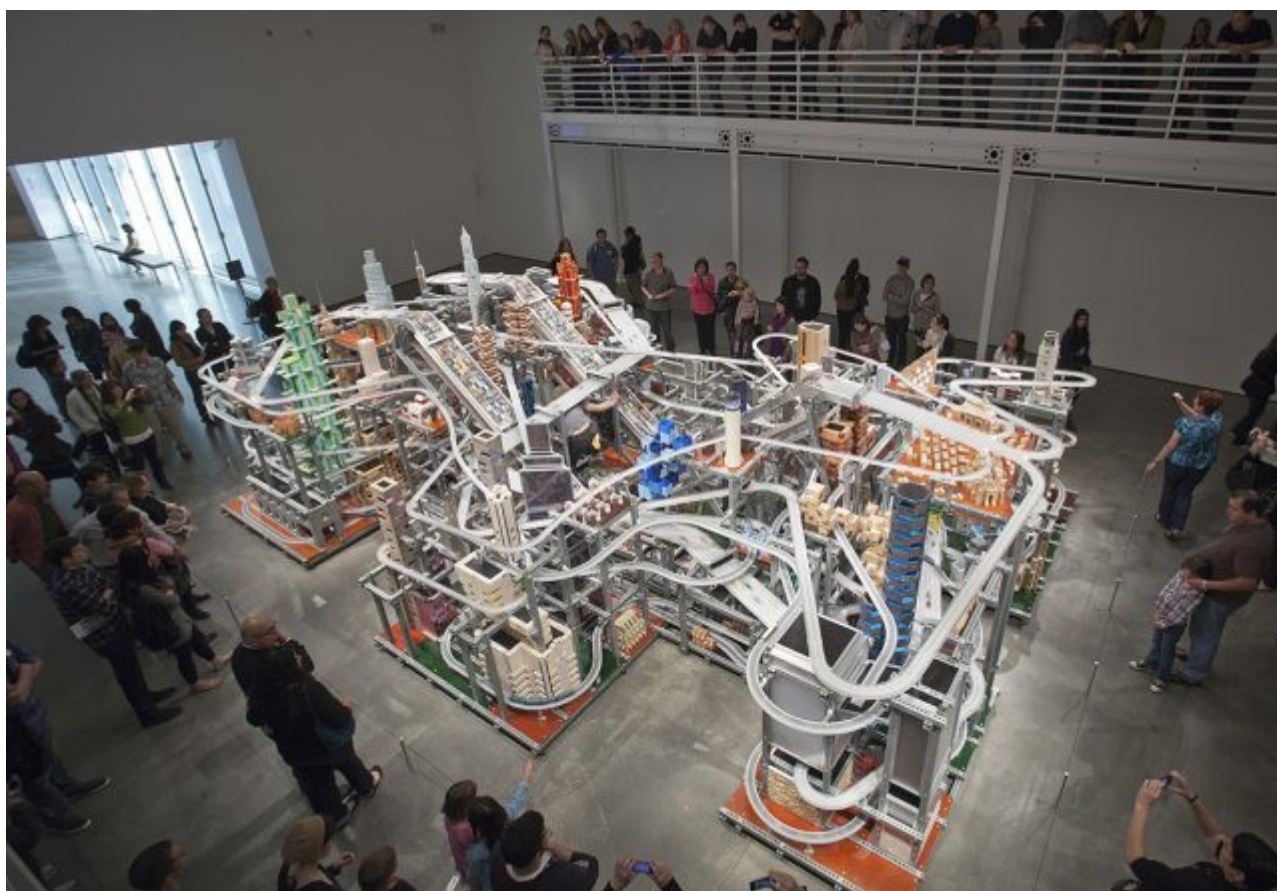


This was brought into particularly strong relief in 1975 when New York City was on the brink of bankruptcy and an infamous headline on the cover of the Daily News paraphrased the then-president Gerald Ford's expression of national sentiment: "Ford to City: Drop Dead".

In a sense, art collecting in this country has been the spread or regionalization of New York taste. Indeed, today's market grew healthy roots and branches across the nation through networks of affiliated dealers across the country formed by Leo Castelli, the dealer who set the foundation for today's vast art market, and who represented the lion's share of every great artist after Abstract Expressionism through to Conceptual Art (and later, the art of the 1980s).

There has been much healthy art production in many different parts of the country that have been ignored or back-seated by New York—honored in their own communities but inevitably corralled under the term "regional" (which usually means work which doesn't follow the formal Modernist line traced from Paris to New York).

In Chicago, for example, the Hairy Who—with many American influences, from folk art to comics—adopted a very specific practice of representation in a period when representation was considered backwards (side note: it is certainly no coincidence that Chicago has always been a center of for collectors of European Surrealism).



Chris Burden, *Metropolis II* (2010) © Chris Burden © 2012 Museum Associates/Lacma. Courtesy the Nicolas Berggruen Charitable Foundation

## Los Angeles

There are plenty of regional centres, from Northern California to Texas, Detroit to D.C., where the art produced has been rooted in the local cultures. But the American center outside of New York with the greatest wealth of artists who have changed the course of post-war art history has undoubtedly been Los Angeles, which was unjustifiably pushed into a regional pocket through New York's critical, institutional and market dominance.

Look at Bruce Nauman, Chris Burden, John Baldessari, Paul McCarthy—they're all LA. These artists, and the generations of students they inspired (who went on to define The New in New York in the first half of the 1980s), exhibited as much in Europe as they did anywhere in this country, so theirs was hardly a regionalist art. The world is beginning to come to grips with this distorting bias.

Less well understood is San Francisco, which has also been a major center for significant artists since the 1950s, many of them rooted, not surprisingly, in countercultural perspectives. Thus far, the American museums of the future are the San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art, with its new paradigm of private/public collaboration, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, whose new facility, if it gets built, promises to rethink the behemoth of the encyclopedic museum. Los Angeles in particular, seems inevitably less focused on Europe and New York and more on Asia to the east, and Latin America to the south, for its future.

## **The gain within the loss**

As a nation in which art has never been seen as central and yet one which has been in the driver's seat of contemporary art history for the past 70 years, have we messed up the whole enterprise with our entrepreneurial predisposition, reducing what was previously understood to be a calling by so effectively professionalizing it? While The New may have become diluted in recent years by a growing market's increased need for new product to consume and gamble upon, we are, at the same time, in a golden age of knowledge, gained and shared through technology and globalization and the resulting diversification in knowledge, taste, and sense of cultural responsibility.

While the top end of the market has been concentrating greater amounts of wealth on a smaller number of artists, both museums and private collectors are "discovering" overlooked postwar masters, including art from Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East. The lineage of art of the past century—a narrative that was neatly wrapped—is being retraced. American museums and galleries that have recognized for decades the inevitably skewed white male bias of the history of art, are now actively pursuing the representation and collecting of, for example, African-American artists. This is taking place at the same time as the broader political discourse in this country seems more invested than ever in reducing and homogenizing our definition of what "American" identity means.

The current dilution of The New is perhaps just a pause, as we take a breath to absorb the massive amount of change that has taken place in art over the past few decades. Perhaps this can-do nation is maturing culturally beyond its teenage years and is on the brink of embracing the complexity of art instead of so efficiently boiling it down to something easily packaged and understood.