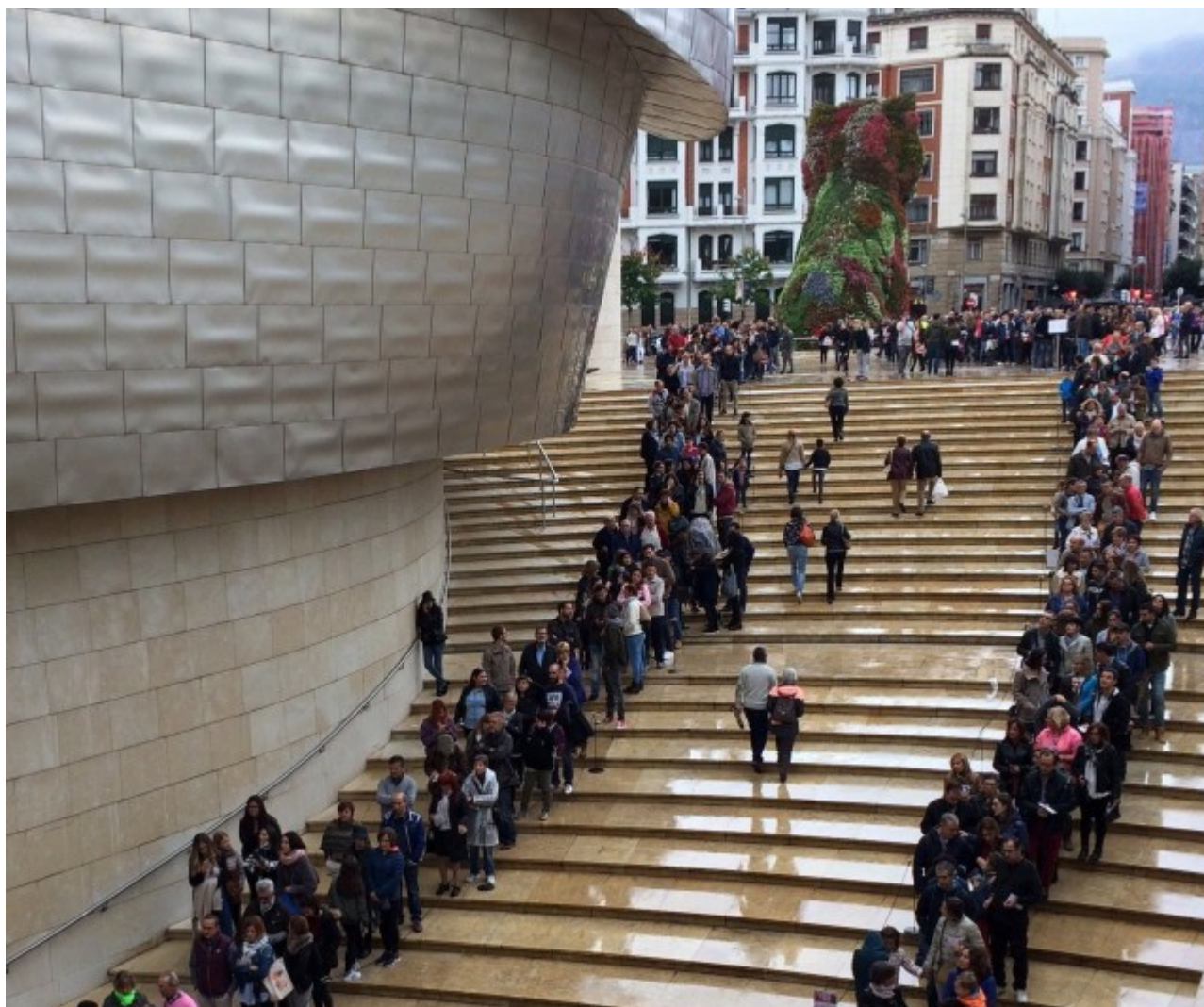



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## Congratulations! You're Going to Have a Retrospective!



People waiting in line to enter the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain. Photo credit: Luis Tejido/Rex/Shutterstock

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Sometime in the 1980s I interviewed [John Baldessari](#), who in his teaching position at CalArts was mentor to (and evidently major influence over) so many of the artists of the so-called Pictures generation, including [David Salle](#), [Jack Goldstein](#), [Ross Bleckner](#) and [Eric Fischl](#). Regarding what since then has become a substantially changed value system of the art world, Baldessari said: "At CalArts you could feel a shift in their generation, even before many had formed their artistic identities. For my generation the greatest achievement was to be on the cover of Artforum, but for them it was to have a sold-out show."

Interestingly, he hadn't even mentioned retrospectives. Perhaps for a contemporary artist focused on salient issues of his

time, who was ever-evolving his art and living in an era during which the scene centered on artists and critics rather than on galleries, markets and museums (in many ways, Baldessari's generation rebelled against the institutional nature of museums), a retrospective was a distant milestone—something that might happen once you were dead, or nearly.

But since the expansion of the art market in the 1980s—which formed the foundation for the commodification of art that now largely governs how art is collected and valued—a museum retrospective has become quite common, even assumed. Indeed, it might be more revealing to look at a list of the 50 most celebrated postwar artists who have not yet had a major museum retrospective rather than those who have.

In this week's edition, [Bernie Lagrange](#) examines [the impact of a retrospective](#) on an artist's market. I am curious about what the data reveals, as I suspect reason would suggest a different wisdom than the perceived one—that the endorsement of museum shows causes markets to rise—and behavior yet another.

The mid-career survey—essentially an invention of the 1980s—has become one of the most common vehicles for exhibiting contemporary art. Most of the time, these exhibitions echo what we already knew about an artist from their regular presence in gallery shows. Rarely, even with a curator's voice, do these shows re-examine the work, separating the great work from good, bad or indifferent production.

Indeed, these shows tend to reinforce artists as the market has already defined them. Conversely, the absence of a mid-career survey/retrospective does not seem to negate a well-collected artist's significance. Take for example, Mark Grotjahn—the highest-priced, best-selling painter of his generation, as well as the strongest—who has nonetheless not yet been the subject of any kind of survey show.



Installation view of Wade Guyton, "Das New Yorker Atelier, Abridged" at Serpentine Gallery, London (29 September 2017-4 February 2018). Photo credit: Ed Tang

Meanwhile, Wade Guyton's [breakout show](#) at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2012-13 was one of the most breathtaking and insightful exhibitions of new painting staged in years (as was his very different, [more recent show](#) at the Serpentine in London), but the momentum in Guyton's market was set long before the exhibition opened. To me, the impact that it had was to make clear more emphatically how much greater he is than most of his peers who utilize contemporary

communication processes as a means of making paintings.

The truly great museum retrospectives are those which make a difference to our understanding of an artist's work. For me, some of the great standouts include those dedicated to [Bruce Nauman](#) (Walker Art Center, 1994/MoMA, 1995), [Charlie Ray](#) at the Whitney (1998), [Gilbert & George](#) at the [Guggenheim](#) (1985), and Matthew Barney "[The Cremaster Cycle](#)" at the Guggenheim in 2003.

Each of these artists, in very different ways, have a complexity of content that develops its greatest potency through the depth, breadth and repetition of the work they have made over decades, which can only be made palpable through experiencing the volume of works in a well-selected retrospective.

(Perhaps not coincidentally, both Nauman and Ray fell into creative crisis after their retrospectives opened, which became the underlying story, compellingly expressed, of the work they made after they got back to the studio once the shows had ended.)

Gerhard Richter's [retrospective in 2002](#) at MoMA proved a similar point, as did Sigmar Polke's at MoMA [in 2014](#), though neither seemed to impact the artist's market. Richter's already had great momentum prior to the show, the value of which the retrospective solidified, while Polke's art is still waiting for the market to develop comfort with the iconoclastic brilliance that lies at the core of the artist's importance, and therefore confidence in discerning what is a great Sigmar Polke and how to value that financially.

In the realm of retrospectives of artists no longer with us, I thought the Lygia Clark [show](#) organized by MoMA in 2014 was both exquisite and a revelation, which caused me to rethink my understanding of postwar, post-European geometric art. Alas, few people I know who were not already fans of her work seemed to have seen it, despite its prominent placement within the museum and its exemplary installation; a poetic master class in how to view a rigorous artistic development.

Does the impact on the market of a retrospective differ when it comes to more historical artists? I can remember extraordinary retrospectives of Picasso, Matisse, Malevich, Brancusi and Munch that were privileges to have seen; but these artists' markets were already so well formed that, while these great shows provided greater insight and deeper appreciation for various bodies of work, they did not trigger new levels of activity in the market.

Even looking to exhibitions that opened the world's eyes to wonderful artists who had fallen under the radar—take [Florine Stettheimer](#) or [Jay DeFeo](#), for example—these may have, at most, brought some material to market that might not have reached it otherwise, although I am not entirely sure that is true.

And isn't this a great thing? A museum retrospective serves art far more than its market.