



Robert Rauschenberg, *Canyon* (1959), The Museum of Modern Art, New York © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

The show at the Royal Academy, curated by Christos Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal, aspired to being definitive, and didn't shy away from grand gestures. The first thing you see, on opening the exhibition catalogue, is a list of three patrons: the heads of state of Germany, where the show opened; the UK, where it ran for almost three months; and, of course, "His Excellency William J. Clinton, President of the United States of America".

To look back at that 1993 experience today is to be truly astounded at how much has changed

To look back at that 1993 experience today is to be truly astounded at how much has changed, in the way we look at and think of American art. For one thing, there were only five women in the show, all of them white, and three men of color: the other 58 artists were all white men. There's no way you could get away with that today. But the other huge change is that 1993 was still early days in terms of looking at art in terms of its dollar value.

Institutionally Racist

Say that you wanted, today, to point out how institutionally racist the curation of the show was. One of your first instincts would be to go to auction records. You would point out that the three black artists (Martin Puryear, David Hammons and Jean-Michel Basquiat) are all incredibly well established in the market, with auction records of \$1.8m, \$8m and \$110m respectively. White artists, on the other hand, seemingly need no such ratification: the auction record for Gary Hill is \$169,000, while that of John Covert is just \$45,000. (Of course, the difference would have been smaller in 1993—but then again, no one would even have thought to have made the comparison back then.)



Andy Warhol, *Twenty-Five Colored Marilyns* (1962) © 2017
 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists
 Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Modern Art
 Museum of Fort Worth

From a present-day perspective of art fairs and horse-race commentary about whose prices are rising fastest, it's almost charming to read Rosenthal, in his catalogue essay, complaining about how "the explosion of the art market" in the late 1970s "caused immense confusion, rendering it ever more difficult to make aesthetic judgments". We were now in an era, he lamented, where "market mechanisms alone (certainly not art criticism) determine hierarchies".

But really that wasn't true, not in 1993, when Rosenthal could pack a show like this one with the art he thought to be objectively the most important, and when viewers like myself would walk slowly around it, taking each piece on its own merits, making amateur critical judgments of our own, but ultimately taking it on authority that these really were the officially-anointed greatest works of the century.

Today, many of the same paintings are inescapably linked with money and gossip much more than they are with curatorial gravitas. Consider Willem de Kooning's *Police Gazette* (1955), which was credited in the 1993 exhibition simply as coming from a "private collection". Today, a five-second Google search will bring up a [string](#) of bold-face owners (Robert and Ethel Scull, Steve Wynn, David Geffen), as well as a suitably eye-popping price tag of \$63.5m when Geffen reportedly sold it privately in 2006 to Steven Cohen. At the top of the Google results: a [column](#) by Donald Kuspit, devoted to "the triumph of money over art" and declaring that "only art that makes money finds its way into the textbooks, which sometimes seem like rationalizations of auction results. Official art history tends to follow the lead of the art markets, consciously as well as unconsciously."



Jackson Pollock, *Mural* (1943). Reproduced with permission from the University of Iowa

Kuspit's column is notable because he also appears in the 1993 exhibition catalogue, with an essay about how six major critics (Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Lawrence Alloway and Lucy Lippard) all "had a lasting effect on our understanding of" the art they advocated. Such an essay could never be written about the critics and artists of today: the crucial role of ratification has been almost entirely outsourced to the market—the most successful and expensive artists are entirely critic-proof. Who needs Rosalind Krauss if [Mera Rubell](#) is following you on Instagram.

Then again, one of the lessons of the 1993 catalogue is precisely that it was America which created the art market as the driver of broader importance. In the immediate post-war period, when the biggest galleries were still in Paris, the foremost dealer of Abstract Expressionists, [Sidney Janis](#), relied on selling European art to make rent, and never had more than nine American artists at any one time. By the mid-1960s, however, Pop Art was already being described as "a collectors' movement", driven in large part by the Sculls and other buyers, largely impervious to critical disapproval. American artists and American collectors were driving the art-world bus, and they have been doing so ever since.

Market Dominance

Today, the most important and influential contemporary art museums are overwhelmingly in America, and are almost by definition the ones with the richest collectors on their boards. Those board members, in turn, who often spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year on art just for their own personal collections, are ultimately responsible for the curatorial vision and acquisition policy of the museum. For all the talk of the internationalization of the art world, the power of the almighty American dollar is still at an all-time high.

If you look at Wikipedia's invaluable [list](#) of the 78 most expensive paintings of all time, an astonishing fact jumps out at you. With just seven exceptions (one Picasso, three Bacons, one Eakins and two paintings from China), all of the pre-1945 works are European, and all of the post-1945 works are American.

America invented AbEx, Pop and Minimalism, and countless other movements; it gave us the heroes of the 1993 show, such as Pollock and Johns and Warhol and Basquiat, as well as thousands of less-celebrated artists who are slowly carving out their own place in the canon and in the auction records.

But more than any of that, America gave the world the entire structure of an art world dominated by rich collectors and astonishing valuations, a world which uses terms like "investment" and "asset class", a world where someone can say that they're interested in "mid-market" works—and that actually tells you something about them, even though it indicates nothing at all about what kind of work they like.

Which is to say: The most important American object in the history of art is not *Mural*, or *Canyon*, or even something like Jeff Koons' *Puppy*. It's the dollar. And it changed everything.