

Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

Culture as Big Business

Art and merchandise



By Allan Schwartzman

Published 3 July 2019 in [Allan's Intro](#)

At a dinner the other night, an artist mentioned being baffled as her students compared the [Whitney Biennial](#) and the [Frieze art fair](#), arguing about which was better as though they were one and the same. It became clear that her students didn't see a meaningful difference between an art fair and a museum exhibition. That the next generation sees these events as part of the same parade of artists and wares is perverse, unsettling—and interesting.

I wonder if this is principally an American phenomenon of culture having become such big business that everything has become commodified: perhaps the radical doesn't live here anymore. My guess is that this hybridization of business and institutions will fly even more wildly in nations of new wealth, such as China, but that, since culture is more commonly embedded into daily life in Europe, the fusing of the commercial and the curatorial will get less traction there. In Latin America art communities fight daily for a clear and necessary separation of taxation and the public good.

Yes, we know that museums do more and more programing that reinforces the consensus of the market: that's where their money comes from. Meanwhile, the criticism of the current [Venice Biennale](#) (which we will be reviewing in the next podcast)

that I heard the most (and that drives me crazy) is: “I didn’t discover any new artists there”. Well, who said that was the job of a biennial? I thought these shows were meant to function as portraits of the most compelling art of today, whether through discovery, rediscovery or enlightening juxtaposition. Only a curator can show us work we thought we knew in ways we never thought about before: you won’t find that at an art fair.

The discovery of new artists has become an industry which, by the way, galleries have been doing a great job of for decades. This is about the language of merchandising—the great American success story, and the great American curse (just ask Gatsby). It is also the enemy of culture and creative invention.

But then again, unlike Europe, art has never been central to American culture. Indeed, it has been so easy to politicize and use as a populist symbol of the “elite”. Of course, it makes sense that culture would become an industry—this is the most effective way to make it palatable, to market the very concept of it to the masses.

So, our annual American issue this year focuses on voice: who has it, what is heard (and how) and what is spoken by whom.