

Dreams that Money can(t) buy

Massimiliano Gioni. Artistic Director, Nicola Trussardi Foundation, Milan

The invitation to this panel came with a long list of questions. What is the role played by marketing in the insertion of artists, groups, or movements in art history? Where and when does business intersect with art history, and how does one affect the other? What is the role played by collectors in the elaboration of a given history? How do artists incorporate and question the business aspect of art into their practice?

First of all, if I had an answer to all these questions, I would not probably be here talking to you but I would be working either for a government, a collector or an investment bank, shaping the market and history at the same time. I would probably be a CIA agent or something like that. And of course I would be a millionaire.

I also thought that the questions posed by Pablo and by this panel were quite timid, as they simply said that art history and the market only influence each other. Well, I think they don't just influence each other: they are not just flirting; they have been sleeping together for quite a long time.

Which doesn't mean they are corrupted or that they have been sleeping with the enemy, but it simply means recognizing that art and art works have a much more complex life than we like to believe.

First of all, we should remind ourselves that art works are never the product of just an individual. Their life, their duration and their collocation in our present and in history are first and foremost cultural and social phenomena: they bring together many different people and different interests, among which quite often are economic and money interest.

Artworks are deposits of social experience, and as such they are also "fossils of our economic life" as the great art historian Michael Baxandall has said.

Unfortunately there is no such a thing as a social history of contemporary art. And one is left to hope that maybe one day an art historian like Baxandall would find the time and energy to write about contemporary art, as he has written about art in the Middle Ages.

The fact is that today we live in quite a schizophrenic time.

Art magazines, for example, even very respected ones, are often maintained thanks to the market and thanks to ads placed by galleries, and yet not many articles or discussions about the market take place in art magazines. The only discussion seems to be concentrated on the prices that art works generate at auction houses. But very little is usually said about deeper connections between art and money.

A sort of formalistic education or bad consciousness has taught to look at art from very specific vantage points, which very seldom include discussions about the impact of economics.

The thing is that money is everywhere in art and in the art world, and yet it gets very seldom written about or commented upon.

Strangely enough though, a large part of the non-specialized audience of contemporary art still sees art and artists as nothing but a fraud, a strategic combination of money and publicity.

Well, don't think I am cynical, but I tend to believe that to a certain extent, the large non-specialized audience has a better understanding of art. Which doesn't mean we should be suspicious of art and artists because of their *liason* with money and economic forces.

As a matter of fact, these relationships have existed probably since the word art was invented, and art historians have already come to terms with it. Recognizing that money had always played a major role in art history doesn't equal with saying that artists are just selling out. It simply means they have to come to terms with economic pressures and eventually find ways to represent them or to subvert them.

Recognizing that artists' dreams are for sale doesn't make their dreams any weaker or more superficial: it might actually make them more powerful; as it proves how creatively artists can react to cultural impositions. And how culture in turn can change to accommodate their visions.

That's why instead of concentrating on contemporary art, I decided to step a little back, and provide some examples in the history of art in which some incredible masterpieces have been produced under very specific economic pressure. I thought that by looking back at history we could understand a little more our present.

After all, many of the agents that we see at play today (collectors, institutions, patrons, and clients) have been part of the game of art for a long time. Recognizing the role of these actors and agents doesn't mean minimizing the role of artists. It means instead recognizing that for our culture art is such a big deal that it can not be left only in the hands of artists. I am stealing again a few ideas from Baxandall, who should really be here talking instead of me.

In his extraordinary study about fifteenth-century painting, Baxandall goes as far as explaining the transition from golden leaf backgrounds and medieval frivolity to more realistic landscapes and classical postures on the basis of economical reasons.

In other words, instead of explaining the stylistic changes between a Gentile da Fabriano fifteenth-century altarpiece and a Masaccio's painting on the basis of some humanistic treatise or some drastic change in the perception of man's role in the universe, Baxandall simply says artists stopped using gold in their paintings because collectors and patrons didn't want it anymore. And they didn't want it because of different reasons:

- A frightening social mobility and the need of dissociating oneself from the flashy new rich.
- The acute shortage of gold in fifteenth-century Florence.
- A classical distaste for sensuous license influenced by neo-ciceronian writings.
- The diffusion of Dutch cloth, whose best products were black, and therefore imposed a completely different dress code among the wealthy.
- The sheer rhythm of fashion.

Which of course doesn't mean that Masaccio or Botticelli or any Renaissance painter were not great artists, nor does this mean that they were simply giving the patrons what they wanted, but it means

recognizing that even at the highest peak of humanistic creation, at the peak of a social and cultural revolution, art was growing at the intersection of many cultural and economic factors.

In the painting by Masaccio you can even see a portrait of two patrons, something— as we all know quite common at the time— which maybe doesn't happen so often today. Even the reasons why patrons were putting money into art are not so different from the reasons guiding collectors and trustees today.

In a rare testimony from the time, Giovanni Rucellai, a very strong patron of the arts in fifteenth-century Florence, explains why he came to acquire and commission works by artists such as Domenico Veneziano, Filippo Lippi, Verrocchio, Pollaiuolo, Andrea del Castagno and Paolo Uccello “The best masters—as he proudly says—there have been for a long time not only in Florence but in Italy”.

Buying and commissioning these works gave him “the greatest contentment and the greatest pleasure because they serve the glory of God, the honor of the city, and the commemoration of myself”.

Well, just replace God with Visibility or with Fame or Education and you will have a striking portrayal of a collector's today.

And not only these highly abstract values were guiding Giovanni Rucellai in his purchases.

Buying such things was also an outlet for the pleasure and virtue of spending money well, a pleasure greater than the admittedly substantial one of making money. Even if art was not tax deductible back then, acquiring art had the advantage of being both noticeable and cheap: bells, marble paving, brocade hangings or other such gifts to a church were more expensive.

There is another interesting comparison that can be drafted between a patron like Giovanni Rucellai and a collector today. Commissioning works in fifteenth century didn't simply mean to get a painting that could be hung in a house. It actually meant to produce art works that would be displayed in churches and chapels for anyone else to see.

Art then was not a private affair, but really a public event.

Something quite similar happens today with museums, foundations, and even media taking over the role that once belonged to the church. For better or for worse, the most advanced collectors and patrons of today's art envision their possessions not as tools for private appreciation or contemplation, but rather as a public machine for consensus.

Some might say that this is particularly true of a society and a moment in history in which artists were and are working upon commission; whether being fifteenth-century Italy or today's circuits of biennials and international exhibitions.

Some might say that when artists are free to work on their own, in the quietness of their studios, they can escape from these pressures and be really free. Nevertheless this romantic vision of the artist descends from a very peculiar cultural and economic model. The idea of the artist as an independent creator, free to produce his or her own paintings and then place them out there for anyone to see or ignore actually casts its origins in seventeenth-century Holland. In other words, our romantic

image of the artist dates back to an economic system based on the bourgeois and middle class consumers of art and culture.

It is the rising of a new class that shapes a new age in the production and distribution of art. It is—to use a very banal example—the age of Vermeer, an age of paintings of interiors, still lifes, paintings of houses, and cabinets. An age of microcosms and quotidian environments. It is an age of paintings of modest scale and modest atmospheres, in which reality and realism appear as a humble conquest, a familiar conquest over one's own immediate surroundings.

This particular sense of one's own position in the world, this peculiar sense of belonging to the individual, the familiar, can be read as expressions of a new class, the middle class, which is both the subject and the client of this new genre of painting.

And these paintings are also the result of something like an industrial production, despite their modest appearance. Just to give an example, in 1560 in Antwerp worked more than 300 painters, versus 177 bakeries and seventy-eight butchers. During the seventeenth century in Holland buying paintings became a widely diffused form of investment, much safer and fruitful than, for example, buying tulips.

The writer John Evelyn visiting the Rotterdam's fair in 1641 says there were thousands of paintings for sale, and says that some of the clients collected an incredible number of paintings, up to 3,000 pounds worth of art.

Once again, a very peculiar economic system, the new born bourgeois system, produces and is reflected in a new art form, in a new stylistic language, and in a new form of circulation of art works.

Things of course are supposed to be different when we come to contemporary art, to a phase in which—we have been taught—artists are supposed to oppose and criticize the society and eventually the economic system they operate in.

Well, then, let's go back to the roots of modernism, to the moment we like to believe this rebellious attitude began.

Let's take for example the impressionists. What were they painting? And where were they exhibiting? Certainly they defined themselves in opposition to the taste of the Salon, but the refusal of such an aesthetic didn't prevent them to embrace and engage with new economic subjects and commercial interests. After all it is with the impressionists that the modern structure of the gallery system is created.

And their subjects, the heroes of their paintings and the landscapes they portray are not so much the wild life en plain air. Thomas Crow has written extensively on this subject, and I cannot help quoting at large from his essays and books. So, as Crow has written:

"The advanced artist after 1860 (and we could say the impressionist or the post impressionist) succumbed to the general division of labor as a full time leisure specialist, an aesthetic technician picturing the sensual expectations of other part time consumers" who accidentally are both the subjects and the clients of the impressionists' paintings.

In other words, the avant-garde, from the early days of Impressionism, not only represents but it also mediates the language and the strategy of commercial entertainment and tourism.

Think of the impressionist paintings circuses, theaters and the first Sunday escapades. But also think of Dadaism, Surrealism and even before Futurism's infatuation with shock tactics and the secret, almost magic life of objects with their mechanics of desire.

The moment they attack and criticize the world that surrounds them, Dadaists, surrealists, futurists and cubists are using the instruments and the language of heavy industry and the world in which the middle class so comfortably lives. And, moreover, whether willing or not, they are also preparing the terrain for modern advertising with one of its most powerful tool: the world in which commodities and objects of affection take on a life on their own and create and populate an autonomous dreamscape.

What happens if we go as far as seeing radical moments in the history of contemporary art in such a perspective? Isn't after all the disappearance of the art objects in the 60s and 70s preparing the terrain for the economy of disembodied products and abstract fluctuations of information? Isn't conceptual art the closest we got to the software industry and the service economy of today, in which a name or a brand are more valuable than an actual manufactured product? In a world that defines itself as Information age, it is both ironic and appropriate that the art world's continual circulation of information and services has become a primary source of profit in itself.

The thing is that even the most radical examples of the modernist tradition cannot transcend the culture and the economic system in which they are born. Sometimes they relate to it on a more abstract, metaphorical level, mimicking the language or the structures of industrial and economic forces, other times they depend directly on the economic system in order to survive. Either way, recognizing the proximity or the promiscuity between art, culture and economics, doesn't mean dismissing modernism and art as corrupted or unable of generating social change.

As again Thomas Crow has brilliantly written: "From the beginning, the successes of modernism have neither been to affirm nor to refuse its concrete position in the social order, but to represent that position in its contradiction, and so act out the possibility of critical consciousness in general."

That's why in the end it is not so important to know that Pollock's canvases could be used as backdrops for *Vogue* fashion shoots, nor is so crucial to know that at one point Warhol was ready sign literally any object in exchange of modest amount of money. It doesn't matter if the artist flirts with money, or even if he goes all the way prostituting himself, because good art has the power to take us elsewhere, in the very moment it immerses itself in the present.

This is a very crucial aspect in our understanding of the history of art, and the history of contemporary art. Recognizing that the social, cultural and economic environments have a strong role in shaping not only the condition in which art is produced or consumed, but even the actual look of art doesn't mean transforming artists in puppets maneuvered by economic or cultural events. Art and artists, as

Focillon said, satisfies certain needs, but also produces new needs. Art is both timely and out of time. It invents a new world, in the very moment it reflects the world in which it is born.

And what Focillon means is not just some idealistic blah, blah, blah; he means that art can also construct codes of cultural and social behavior. As an example he mentions the portraits of Van Dyck, which actually gave shape to a new image of British aristocracy. Van Dyck lived in a country still brutal and violent, still agitated by revolutions and primal instincts, and yet in his paintings he imaged and distilled humanity unknown to the very same sitters of his portraits.