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Art and Money: Experience Destruction Exposure

The relationship between art and money is, at times, a tale of domination and censorship so subtle that even those producing the art works and the audience are frequently unaware that they are being influenced. I do not wish to suggest that commerce automatically corrupts the world of art or that all art should address this issue. Nor do I wish to suggest that this tangled relationship is a recent phenomenon.¹ I would suggest, however, that as users, producers, and commentators we should be aware of the system in which we operate. Pierre Bourdieu, in his conversation with the German artist, Hans Haacke discusses patronage and describes the hidden nature of the relationship, he states:

Patronage is a subtle form of domination that acts thanks to the fact that it is not perceived as such. All forms of symbolic domination operate on the basis of misrecognition, that is, with the complicity of those who are subjected to them."²

He also refers to a lack of awareness and remarks how so few artists and writers are sensitive to the forms of domination that are exerted on the art world. There are many reasons for this insensitivity and I would suggest that it is a combination of pragmatism, helplessness, and lack of interest – however that is a concern for another paper. What I wish to focus on are those artists who were and are sensitive to the relationship between art and money and the risk to the independence of art posed by the hidden nature of this relationship. I have chosen to look at works by three artists, Lygia Clark, Hans Haacke, and Gustav Metzger, who have addressed this relationship very directly, but in very different ways.

¹ There are numerous historical examples of attempts to address this relationship e.g. Roger Fry's article "Art and Commerce" (*Journal of Cultural Economics* 22, 1998, pp. 49-59, first published in 1926); Robert Hughes, "On Art and Money" *The New York Review of Books* 31, No. 19 (1984). In his review, "Co-opting the arts" (*Art in America*, October 2002), Robert Atkins discusses two recent books that address this issue; he states "we are long overdue for a new 'institutional critique' of the intertwined relationship of art, money and power".

² Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free exchange* (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell, 1995), p. 54.

Ian Burns, co-founder of the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses,³ in his essay *The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation* discusses the influence of economics on art production:

While it may once have seemed an exaggeration of economic determinism to regard works of art as 'merely' commodities in an economic exchange, it is now pretty plain that our entire lives have become so extensively constituted in these terms that we cannot any longer pretend otherwise. Not only do works of art end up as commodities, but there is also an overwhelming sense in which works of art *start off* as commodities.⁴

Burns is echoing Adorno's remarks in his essay *Culture Industry Reconsidered* when he states: "Culture entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through."⁵

The Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920-1988) addressed the notion of art as commodity. Her work examined the various roles within the art world – the artist, the mediating object, and the spectator – and relationships between these. Her works were largely un-saleable and could often be recreated using cheap, easily available materials. The American artist Daniel Buren argues that: "If the artist has anything against the art system, he should start by rebelling against himself as an artist, i.e. against his own product as a culture-gadget."⁶ Clark attempted to transform the role of artist and spectators and to create an in-between state of joint participation in which both were responsible for the creation of the work.⁷ Clark offered what she termed 'propositions' rather than complete artworks, which the participant could complete. The presence of the participants' body was essential and the work only existed in the moment of participation. The critic and writer Guy Brett, one of Clark's fiercest advocates, says of her work: "The object made no sense without the living body, the present act, and therefore to alienate it as a commodity, to preserve it as an art work, was meaningless."⁸

³ Founded in New York in 1969.

⁴ Ian Burns, "The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation" *Artforum* (April 1975), pp. 34-37, here: p. 34.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on mass culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 100.

⁶ Daniel Buren is quoted in Barbara Reise (ed.), "Gurgles around the Guggenheim" *Studio International*, no. 181 (June 1971), pp. 246-250. Buren's work had been removed from the Guggenheim International 1971.

⁷ She was critical of the idea of the artist as a demiurge and criticised those artists who fostered a shaman-like image, for example her contemporary, Joseph Beuys.

⁸ Guy Brett, "Six Cells", in *Lygia Clark. Exhibition Catalogue* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 1997), pp. 17- 35, here: p. 19.

Clark's work de-emphasised the visual and, in some cases, went as far as obscuring the sense of vision altogether. This forced the participant to experience the work through other senses, again rendering the notion of a passive 'viewer' obsolete. These works were not meant to be viewed but to be experienced. Brett writing in the *Third Text* describes Clark's *Air & Stone* as being simultaneously one of Clark's simplest and most complex works.⁹

What is the sensation of first inflating it and putting it between one's hands? Its utterly simple communication of emptiness and fullness, of weight and lightness? Its open sensuality which seems to merge the attributes of male and female? An experience of the tenderness of one's own hands, or handling? It is all these things at once. At the same time, you realize it could just as easily be dismissed as 'nothing'. It has the Zen-like quality of a paradoxical initiation in 'life'.¹⁰

Clark, always concerned with the use value of her work, eventually stopped making work for a gallery setting and began making objects that were used in therapy session for her 'clients'.

Clark's works also raises the issue of the fate of these works when acquired by galleries or when documented, and the documentation itself becomes a commodity, highlighting the difficulty of avoiding the market and the art world's ability to commodify everything.¹¹ This issue is also significant in relation to the work of Gustav Metzger.

Gustav Metzger's career has been one of resistance, to the commodification of his work, to the pressure to make permanent art which the market exerts on artists, and to commercial art venues. And yet his output demonstrates not distaste for the art world but a love for the world of art and a desire to protect and repair it. Metzger had good reason to be concerned about art, for he had seen for himself how art could be used as a powerful political weapon. Metzger was born in Nuremberg in 1926 into an Orthodox Jewish family. Metzger was aware, for example, how the Nazi uniforms became more stylish year by year, creating and reinforcing an impression of an increase in power and influence. The infamous Party rallies which took place in Nuremberg made a big impression on the young Metzger. From these, he learnt about the power of art, the way that events can be orchestrated to achieve a desired effect. The Nazis manipulated these events in

⁹ To make *Air & Stone* inflate a small clear polythene bag and tie it with an elastic band. Place a smooth stone in a depression made in one corner. Gently press the sides of the bag so that the stone rises and falls in the depression.

¹⁰ Guy Brett, "Lydia Clark: The Borderline between art [and] life" *The Third Text*, (Autumn 1987), pp. 65-94, here: p. 84.

¹¹ There is of course the economy of which I am a part that includes catalogues, photographs, reproduction rights, conferences and research focusing on their work.

part to impress their followers but, like all military parades, they were also designed to instil fear in their enemies. Metzger and one of his brothers Mendel escaped to Great Britain on a “Kindertransport” in 1939 when he was twelve years old. His parents, grandparents, and older brother perished in a concentration camp. These traumatic early experiences coupled with his experience of political activism through his successful North End Protest and his involvement with the Committee of 100, a militant splinter group of CND, had a significant effect on the shaping of Metzger’s worldview and his art.¹²

If Gustav Metzger is known at all, it is for his Auto Destructive Art Manifestos and demonstrations. “Auto Destructive Art is art which contains within itself an agent which automatically leads to its destruction within a period of time.”¹³ In the third of his manifestos, he links destruction to creativity. This use of destruction for what he saw as beneficial ends is clearly illustrated in Metzger’s call for ‘Years Without Art’. In 1974 Metzger was invited to participate in a group show at the ICA in London: *Art into society/Society into Art: Seven German Artists*.¹⁴ Metzger decided not to include a piece in the show and instead he demonstrated his disillusionment with the art world by his catalogue inclusion – *Years without Art, 1977-1980*. This piece is indicative of Metzger’s work of the period in that it is what is absent that is significant. His work could be seen as performing two related functions – to use art as an agent of social change and as a way of reforming the artworld itself. However he was aware of the acute difficulty of making political work when the artworld is so closely bound to the possessors of power, and in his call to down tools he describes the predicament facing artists. In Metzger’s view:

The use of art for social change is bedevilled by the close integration of art and society. The state supports art, it needs art as a cosmetic cloak to its horrifying reality, and uses art to confuse, divert and entertain large numbers of people. Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose the umbilical cord of the state.¹⁵

Given his belief in the benefit of destruction as a route to change – destruction for improvement, it is not surprising that he should eventually call for an outright Art

¹² Biographical details are taken from Clive Philpott’s chronology in Gustav Metzger, Andrew Wilson and Clive Phillpot, *Gustav Metzger: ‘damaged nature, auto destructive art’*, (London: Coracle, 1996) and comments in Ken McMullen’s documentary film *Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger* (London: Arts Council, 2004).

¹³ From Gustav Metzger’s *Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art*, first issued on 10th March 1960 and reprinted in Metzger et al., ‘*damaged nature, auto destructive art*’, op. cit.

¹⁴ Hans Haacke was one of the artists included in this show.

¹⁵ Metzger, *Art into Society/ Society into Art*. ICA. Exhibition Catalogue, 1974.

Strike – the cessation of all art activity for three years. Like a chronically ill patient whose heart is stopped momentarily in the hope that once restarted it will have a sustainable rhythm, Metzger's Strike was a desperate measure in an attempt to save the art world, what Metzger described as 'deep surgery', a germination or fallow period. This act then was to be a sacrifice; it might not have seemed productive at the time, but was in fact something given up for a greater long-term gain. Metzger highlights the benevolence of this action when he describes this as a 'reformist' rather than a 'revolutionary' action.

Metzger gave three-year advance notice of the proposed strike. He first issued his call in 1974, proposing that the strike be held between 1977-1980, thus giving adequate time for artists to find other ways of making a living. Metzger did point out that most artists were not in fact supported by their work, but produced it at a loss and would thereby save money as a result of the strike. There was provision within the scheme for artists who were overwhelmed with the need to be creative – "These artists will be invited to enter camps, where the making of art works is forbidden, and where any work produced is destroyed at regular intervals."¹⁶ Metzger was criticised for this suggestion as it appeared to represent an authoritarian attitude that was in contradiction with Metzger's philosophy. He has since remarked that this section of the call was meant to be a joke.¹⁷ He suggested alternative outlets for the artist's energies in the consideration of the artworld and the construction of a new and more equitable system that could be put in place at the end of the period. Metzger himself observed the three year abstinence; however, his call was not met with enthusiasm. In fact, when asked how other artists responded to his call, Metzger replied "nobody took the slightest notice" and concluded that "artists were 'disgusting bastards'". Inspired by what he viewed as Freud's greatest success – that he forced the world to face up to the challenge of self-examination, Metzger shares that desire. "I need to take up that function of saying to myself and others ... face up to what is instead of denying ... [and ask] What is the source of you being an artist, where does the money come from? What are the implications of accepting that money, that patronage?"¹⁸

Another German-born artist, Hans Haacke, also takes up these questions. Haacke was born in Cologne in 1936. As with Metzger, a pivotal piece by Hans Haacke was a work that didn't happen. This was Haacke's 1971 exhibition highlighting the hidden relationship between the art world and commerce, which was cancelled by the Guggenheim for fear of offending the museum's patrons.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ McMullen, *Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger*, op.cit.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

One of the themes which runs through Haacke's work is an attempt to expose the invisible manipulation of public opinion exercised by multinational corporations by their use of patronage of art to create an image of humane and enlightened cultural values, often masking suspect political affiliations or unethical business practices.

The specific contemporary danger to the independence of art is identified by Ian Burns in a 1975 *Artforum* article:

What we have seen more recently is the power of market values to distort all other values, so even the concept of what is and is not acceptable as 'work' is defined first and fundamentally by market and only secondly by 'creative urge' (etc.).¹⁹

This issue is highlighted by two encounters between Haacke and the superstructure of art in the 20th century, The Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern art in New York.

In MOMA-Poll 1970, 'installation for audience participation' in the Museum of Modern Art's *Information* exhibition, visitors to the exhibition were faced with a question: "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?" They were given ballot papers and asked to cast the vote into one of two boxes each of which was fitted with a counting device. This piece highlighted the relationship between the Rockefeller family, who had helped found and financially support the Museum of Modern Art and Richard Nixon. Nelson Rockefeller was the then Republican Governor of New York and had been on MoMa board of trustees since 1932. This led to a correspondence between the director of the museum David Hightower and David Rockefeller who was also a museum trustee.²⁰ David Rockefeller agreed that Haacke's work should not be removed or changed, because this would interfere with the artist's freedom of expression; however, what he did question was whether in fact this work could be called art at all. This objection is the very nub of that subtle influence of patronage, the risk to art as described by Bourdieu, the power to determine what is and is not art.

Given the controversy surrounding the MOMA poll it seems surprising that the Guggenheim were unprepared for the territory they were getting into by agreeing to exhibit a work by Haacke in 1971. Haacke's proposed exhibition consisted of three systems – social, political, and biological. It was the social system, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social*

¹⁹ Ian Burns "The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation" *Artforum* April (1975): pp. 34-37, p.34

²⁰ Reise (ed.), *Gurgles at the Guggenheim*, op.cit.

System, May 1 1971, which proved problematic for the Guggenheim. This section consisted of photographs of the façade of Manhattan real estate holdings, which were accompanied by business information relating to these properties. All the information had been collected from the public record office of the County Clerk and was therefore freely available. Thomas Messer, director of the Guggenheim Museum, again raised the question of what is a suitable and appropriate subject for art:

I would say that at the point at which the intention and the result of a work is no longer general, summary, metaphoric and symbolic, by the point it addresses itself to a known specific topical situation, its status as a work of art – or at least its immunity as a work of art – is in question.²¹

In his correspondence with Haacke, Messer states:

. . . under our Charter we are pursuing [a]esthetic and educational objectives that are self-sufficient and without ulterior motive. On those grounds, the trustees have established policies that exclude active engagement toward social and political ends.²²

Taken to its logical conclusion this argument would prevent the Guggenheim from exhibiting works by Picasso, Goya, and all religious art.

Haacke entered into correspondence with Messer in the hope of arriving at an acceptable compromise. Messer replied to changes suggested by Haacke: “the implied changes that you propose to inject would render the same displays inappropriate for presentation in this museum though not necessarily elsewhere since it would hopelessly confuse assumptions under which we now function.”²³ Interestingly, this suggests that the work itself is of a museum standard and therefore confirms its status as art, but it is the context that is at issue. This then created a completely new category of art – art that is offensive in the context of the Guggenheim. This is perhaps not very surprising, given the subsequent history of the Guggenheim as a global art brand, with branches in Bilbao, Berlin, Venice, and Las Vegas as well as two branches in New York. This has led some critics to refer to these galleries as part of the ‘McGuggenheim’ franchise.

Donald Kuspit in his article *Regressive Reproduction and Throwaway Conscience* is a harsh critic of what he terms “confrontational representation”. He discusses the work of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Hans Haacke; and refers

²¹ Benjamin Buchloh, “Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason”, in *Art in America* vol. 76 (1988), pp. 97-159, here: p. 99.

²² Reise (ed.), *Gurgles at the Guggenheim*, op.cit., here p. 249.

²³ *ibid.* p. 250.

to their indebtedness to reproductive technology, which he sees as inconsistent with their aims. He states:

Neo-moralist art falls short of its goal without knowing it, because of its distrust of the humanism of imagination – its preference for the illusions of reproductive representation.²⁴

He describes them as being no different from any other “creative novelty” in the social machine. This criticism however does not take account of the imagination of the viewer, who can distinguish between the dehumanising global media and when those media are used to highlight the issue. Bourdieu suggests that artists have an ability to manipulate the media in a way that political movements do not, and that this gives the artist a particular power. He summarises his argument as follows:

This is where the specific competence of the artist is so important, because a person cannot just suddenly become a creator of surprise and disconcertion. The artist is the one who is capable of making a sensation, which does not mean being sensational, like television acrobats, but rather, in the strong sense of the term, putting across on the level of sensation – that is – touching the sensibility, moving people – analyses which would leave the reader or spectator indifferent if expressed in the cold rigor of concept and demonstration.²⁵

Not only does Kuspit criticise these artists for their means of production but also he does so on grounds that must strike fear in the heart of anyone who objects – the fear of being co-opted, of being used as a pawn by the very system to which one is objecting, so that one comes to represent that bit of acceptable self-criticism that shows just how broadminded and open a particular society or institution is.

The social moralist artists become more manipulated than manipulative: they are used “creatively” by the social machine. They become a tic within the social machine, a minor malfunctioning, easily corrected yet allowed to exist at the whim of the powers that be. It uses them to show the full extent of its powers.²⁶

Kuspit is echoing a wider argument that the avant-garde is always assimilated and co-opted to support the status quo, that, in fact, the avant-garde is the new establishment. However, I would suggest an alternative way of looking at this assimilation, which would also apply to artists making political work. Within any

²⁴ Donald Kuspit, “Regressive Reproduction and Throwaway Conscience”, in *Art Scribe International* (Jan/Feb 1987), pp. 26-31, here: p. 31.

²⁵ Bourdieu and Haacke, *Free exchange*, p. 28.

²⁶ Kuspit, “Regressive Reproduction and Throwaway Conscience”, p. 30.

group of artists there will be those who will be less committed to autonomy than others, there will be those who can more easily reconcile their art to the market, and those who succumb to the charms of canonisation. Among those who achieve some sort of success and reputation but retain their political commitment there may well be those artists whose message is understood and has an impact in a positive sense of adding to and improving rather than begin engulfed by the institution they address. An example of this would be work that addressed the political situation in South Africa prior to the end of Apartheid.

To say that artists such as Clark, Haacke and Metzger would inevitably be used to reinforce the *status quo* suggests that they are/were working naively and incomprehendingly within a system. On the contrary, all were well acquainted through personal experience with the symbolic power of art and how it could be used both for good or ill with repercussions far beyond the world of art. Although working in different countries and at different times, they have an underlying belief in art and the ability of art to be a vehicle for social and personal change. They were/are also aware of the risks of art being used for propaganda and each strove to make their public aware of this. Interestingly, to achieve a degree of independence, all three found sources of income other than directly from their work, which freed them to some extent from the constraints imposed by the art market.²⁷

If one looks at Haacke's career there is a sense in which he is the acceptable revolutionary within the art world. He is an insider, having exhibited in Documenta and participated in the Venice Biennale – these are not the career moves of an artist who has alienated those with power within the system. However, after the Guggenheim cancellation of his show he was not invited to show in an American public gallery for fifteen years.²⁸ Like Clark and Metzger, his work was more successful in Europe.²⁹ If he is the acceptable face of art's self-examination, he has proved to be a force to be reckoned with and only institutions confident enough to endure a high level of self-examination and exposure can risk an encounter with him.

Metzger says himself that his work was largely ignored and critics Guy Brett and Yve-Alain Bois state that Clark did not in her lifetime receive the recognition she deserved. This however, may have its advantages. Patricia Bickers, referring to Lucy Lippard's³⁰ comments in *The Dematerialization of Art*, states "it would

²⁷ Haacke taught at Cooper Union. Lygia Clark taught at the Sorbonne 1968-1976.

²⁸ From an interview with Ilana Stanger of TheArtBiz.com, found on www.nyfa.org.

²⁹ Possibly reflecting the difference between American and European art funding.

³⁰ Lucy Lippard was a co-founder of The Art Workers Coalition along with Hans Haacke in 1969.

seem that Conceptual Art's best hope of avoiding commodification lay in the likelihood of it, and its agenda, effectively being ignored."³¹

Metzger is enjoying a resurgence of interest in his work. For example, the call for *Years Without Art* was taken up by other artists some years later – Stewart Home organised an 'Art Strike' between 1990 and 1993³² and Gavin Wade curated the exhibition 'Strike' in 2002, both of which referred to Metzger's *Years Without Art*.³³ Increasingly, exhibitions that reflect on the legacy of the art of the 60's now include Lygia Clark.³⁴ This does not necessarily mean that they have been co-opted but rather that their messages are even more pertinent now that we have lived through two decades of the legacy of Reagan and Thatcher when the art world surrendered to market forces.³⁵ It suggests a looking back to the sixties as a golden age of engagement when art had a social and political value and was seen as part of society, not merely a commodity or part of a celebrity culture but a field of intellectual inquiry.

These artists highlighted questions of value within the art world; a world that prioritizes exchange value over use or experiential value, where big business (one thinks of Saatchi and Saatchi) can subtly influence the type of art that is appropriate to represent our age, the type of work that will be purchased by institutions and will form the 20th and 21st century sections of the museums of the future. They produced work that is performative, in much the same way that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes knowledge as performative i.e. "knowledge does rather than simply is".³⁶ Haacke, Metzger and Clark are concerned with knowledge and power in their works, which 'do' rather than 'are'. We are not being asked to simply look, but to think, to feel, and to act. They ask us to take art seriously, to appreciate that it has a value beyond its role as a marketable commodity, to be bought, sold, and kept safe for investment purposes. This is not autonomous art but art that has a value for our culture. They offer an opportunity,

³¹ Patricia Bickers, "'Oh Politics Schmopolitics!' Art in the Postmodern Age", in *Third Text*, vol. 16, Issue 4 (2002), p. 337.

³² Stewart Home The Art Strike papers are available at <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/artstrik.htm> *About the Art Strike* can be accessed at http://www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/y_About_the_Art_Strike.html.

³³ Wade asked artists to submit text in response to two questions: "How does/could/would the withdrawal of art affect the world? And, does the answer to the question reveal ways that art can affect the world or strike a blow on the structures of the world?"

³⁴ A forthcoming symposium at Tate Modern will include a discussion of Clark's work.

³⁵ Discussed by Patricia Bickers in 'Oh Politics Schmopolitics!', op.cit.

³⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 124.

-as Metzger says, to face up to things, to see and question those things which we take as given. These works encourage, lead, and stimulate the viewer/reader/participant into an interactive participatory mode of perception and collaboration.

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