

Artists, Curators, Exhibitions and the Changing Face of Contemporary Art

Background notes

Barry Venning — 18 May 2022



The Homeless Museum of Art (HoMu). Director Noterdaeme and Florence Coyote at the HOMU Booth by the High Line entrance in Chelsea, NYC Photo: Daniel Isengart

Most of the older histories of modern art tended to present their subject largely in terms of a procession of innovative artists, each of whom made a significant contribution to modernist visual culture. Around these innovators, there was a host of other figures – gallery owners, dealers, curators, collectors and critics. When these characters made it into the older histories of modern art, as the Impressionist dealer, Paul Durand Ruel, or the Cubist dealer, Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, were bound to, in the main they appeared as enablers, but were treated very much as secondary figures. In the last fifty years or so, however - and this has much to do with the accelerating pace of globalisation, the collapse of communism and the information revolution – this older situation has changed in a great many ways. The most important contemporary dealers, such as Larry Gagosian, who was recently described by Forbes magazine as “The P T Barnum of the art world”, or Arne Glimcher of Pace Gallery, or Bill Acquavella, shape the face of global contemporary art (plate 1). Their annual revenues would be



Plate 1. The ‘mega-dealers’. From left to right: Arne Glimcher, Bill Acquavella, Larry Gagosian, and Marc Glimcher. Photo © Axel Depuex 2021.

the envy of many international corporations, amounting to almost \$1 billion in Gagosian's case, \$500 million in Glimcher's and \$400 million for Acquavella. To some extent, they are still enablers of artistic careers, but they have infinitely greater power than somebody like Kahnweiler used to have because they command an international network of galleries through which they act as gatekeepers, determining who we, the art lovers and museum visitors, get to see. An artist who is offered a contract with Pace, Gagosian, Acquavella, David Zwirner, Hauser and Wirth or White Cube is also automatically on the radar of the wealthiest collectors and the most influential museums and public art galleries in the world, such as the various Guggenheims, the Tate, the Museum of Modern Art New York and so on.

In addition to the much enhanced power of the mega-gallerists, the last half-century has also seen the rise to prominence of the international curator, crossing the globe from one venue to another, selecting and presenting work by established and emergent artists at art fairs and biennials. The most celebrated of these, and the most influential, is undoubtedly the Nigerian curator, Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019) who, in a series of landmark exhibitions, showed the work of a great many African Asian and Middle-Eastern artists (who would not normally have had a major museum show in the West) alongside the work of their European and American contemporaries. It goes without saying that those non-Western practitioners became very attractive to the mega-dealers mentioned above.

There are, of course, a great many artists who are unimpressed by the fact that global contemporary art seems to be dominated by a nexus of mega-dealers, jet-setting curators, museums and billionaires, and that the display of their own works is frequently beyond their control. This has led to a plethora of artistic attempts to expose and criticise the art establishment, some of which are considered below. It has also led some artists to establish their own exhibition spaces to show off their art, and often the art of those they admire, in near-optimal conditions. There is a long history of artists opening their own galleries when they felt frozen out of the institutional art world: the great landscapist, JMW Turner did so after a bitter row with some of his colleagues in the Royal Academy and the Parisian Surrealists staged a now famous anti-colonial exhibition in 1931, in opposition to the official exhibitions celebrating French colonialism.

Neither of these examples can compare with the extraordinary activities of the American minimalist sculptor, furniture designer and architect, Donald Judd (1928 -94). In the late 1960s, Judd became increasingly infuriated by what he took to be the cramped and unsatisfactory conditions in which his work was shown in commercial and public galleries. His first response was to purchase for \$65,000 a former clothing factory in Manhattan, 101 Spring Street, to serve as his home, his studio and a space for showing his and his friends' work. But it wasn't long before he outgrew the Spring Street premises and became tired of New York. To the art world's surprise, he began to buy acres of land and a number of redundant or semi-derelict buildings in the remote and decaying West Texas town of Marfa. He restored the buildings, which included a former army base, Fort D A Russell, then installed his large three-dimensional pieces in spaces that were perfectly designed for them (plate 2), along with similarly large works by contemporary artists whose art he admired. As the volume of art increased, and art-lovers began to arrive in increasing numbers, Marfa's decline was reversed and it became a well-known, albeit unlikely, cultural destination. Before his death in 1994, Judd turned his collection and his various buildings into a registered charity called the Chinati Foundation, which serves not only to preserve and promote Judd's vision, but also to commission and display work by both well-established and early-career artists.



Plate 2. Donald Judd. *100 untitled works in mill aluminum*. 1982–86. Permanent collection, the Chinati Foundation, Marfa Texas.

Tracey Emin, who visited Marfa, was so overwhelmed by what she saw that she was moved to create her own combined studio and museum in a former commercial printer's premises in her hometown of Margate. In fact, Emin's plans for her Margate base have expanded, Judd-like, to include an art school in a former bathhouse and mortuary. Emin's colleague and fellow YBA, Damien Hirst has, from the very beginning, acted as a curator and promoter of his own and others' work, so it was probably to be expected that he too would open his own gallery. Hirst purchased an extraordinary terrace of listed industrial buildings in Newport Street, near Waterloo station, that were formerly theatre carpentry and scenery painting workshops. He had them converted by the architectural practice of Caruso St. John into an immaculate suite of exhibition rooms that Hirst has used not only to display his own works and those of his peers, but also to revive the reputations of once celebrated but now neglected artists such as John Hoyland and Alan Davie and, currently, to display paintings by the reclusive and little-known Australian artist, Keith Cunningham (b. 1929).



Plate 3. Marcel Broodthaers. *Musée d'Art Moderne - Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*. 16th May – 9th July 1972. Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf

In addition to the artists who set up their own exhibition spaces, there have been others, such as Marcel Broodthaers (1924-76), Ilya Kabakov (b.1933) or the art historian and critic, Filip Noterdaeme (b. 1964), who lampooned the official art world by founding imaginary (and usually itinerant) galleries. The most celebrated of these was Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne - Département des Aigles* (*Museum of Modern Art – Eagles Department*), which first appeared at the Monnaie de Paris in 1968-69. It consisted of a bizarre concatenation of old prints, everyday objects, museum postcards, political emblems and hand-made works by Broodthaers himself (plate 3). He described his imaginary museum as “on the one hand, a political parody of art shows, and on the other hand an artistic parody of political events”. If Broodthaers set out to parody the official art world and especially the major museums and galleries, others, such as the Scandinavian artist duo, Elmgreen and Dragset (b. 1961 and 1969 respectively) and the German photographer, Thomas Struth (b.1954), have made close scrutiny of museum spaces - and what happens in them - the main subject of their work. In 2005, Elmgreen and Dragset photographed the austere interiors of empty, white-walled German museums, thus revealing the lingering presence of what the Irish artist and critic, Brian O’ Doherty (b. 1928) described in 1976 as the ‘White Cube’: the supposedly neutral, value-free art spaces beloved of modernist bastions like the MoMA New York.



Plate 4. Thomas Struth: *Audience 1 - Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence* 2004.
Chromogenic print on UV plexiglas. 185 x 289.5 cm

In a celebrated series of large colour photographs, Thomas Struth turned his lens away from the walls and onto those of us who visit museums: he captured us in the act of looking, or sometimes not looking, at the artworks (plate 4). Struth's photographs questioned the widely held idea that looking at art in a museum is essentially passive, but some contemporary artists have gone out of their way actively to involve the spectator in the art work – a tendency described by the critic and curator, Nicolas Bourriaud, as 'relational' art. As a prime example of relational art, Bourriaud chose the Thai artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija: rather than create objects for gallery walls, Tiravanija began in 1990 to serve up Pad Thai and other Asian dishes, free of charge, to museum visitors. Tiravanija's work (plate 5) – is highly suggestive of the extent to which the experience and the presentation of art have broadened in recent years. To bring this introduction full circle, in 2021, Tiravanija joined the roster of artists represented by the mega-dealer, David Zwirner. Earlier this year, he served up Pad Thai at Zwirner's Hong Kong premises.



Plate 5. Rirkrit Tiravanija. *Pad Thai*. First performed 1990. Here performed at David Zwirner New York in 2007

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One good way to get a sense of the power of the 'mega-dealers' is to look at their corporate websites:

David Zwirner: <https://www.davidzwirner.com/>

Gagosian: <https://gagosian.com/>

Acquavella: <https://www.acquavellagalleries.com/>

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