

# ART AFTER THE CRISIS?

## the social value of the collector for cultural development

by Fré Ilgen

The past decades the entire focus on the financial gains to be found on the art market has created the current situation in which there are hardly any collectors who are aware that buying artworks is immediately supporting the artists. Collectors have a very important social role which is lost in the emphasis on brand names and best deals. Collecting art and commissioning artworks by nobility, religious institutions and the wealthy is as old as art itself, what we call the Western art market, emerged in New York in the late 1950's and really took off during the 1960's. Ever since then the art market has become an accepted phenomenon and has become more and more successful and professional.

Artists have been celebrated as the new 'rock-stars', whose works are discussed in terms of auction records. Such a focus on publicity and promotion created the confusion that this would concern a general impression though in fact only a handful of artists has been that successful. Collectors are continuously told that all kinds of artists are the new 'shooting stars' with promising high revenues. The opportunism of desiring to be part of the art-market as financially booming phenomenon, the excitement to be in the middle of all that which seems profitable, obviously has led to the over-load of artworks, overload of exhibitions, galleries, art fairs, an overload unimaginable before in human history, which caused an inflation of the experience of art and an immediately linked dangerous inflation of the desire for art.

The financial crisis that started in 2008 and swept the world in 2009, still shakes the international art market and has changed more than is obviously perceived and will reveal problems more or less still hidden within the familiar art market structure. The creation and development of art always depends on financial backing, all through human history fine arts as part of any culture always flourished in economically successful times. For example, the great Baroque in Europe in the times of economic colonial profiting, or the Ottoman culture flourished when this empire was at its largest. The Mughal period in India and the Middel East or Silla-Korea each flourished culturally in the golden years of trade – times which seem to return nowadays in modern Korea.

Culture is about shaping a cohesion and consensus of interests to which artworks contribute substantially. A consensus of interests cannot be decided top-down by any market-leader but can only happen in a natural way by having lots of good artworks around. The majority of artists nowadays have to cope with a harder struggle for which we can see two major causes that seem to be linked: the promoting of art for its financial value alone and the disappearance of curiosity of the average art-audience. Obviously, this affects also galleries, art fairs, museums, art magazines.

The Western art world and those that blindly follow the western model can only blame themselves: the overload of exhibitions, art fairs and biennales have caused more damage than good: there has never been so much art around anywhere on the planet, but simultaneously it has never been so difficult for artists to acquire a basic income. Mostly motivations which have nothing to do with an acknowledgement of art as a personal experience or cultural expression drive the overload of art exhibitions. The overload of art only temporarily brought more sales, because it triggered the general loss of genuine excitement and passivity on the art market.

This can be explained by the human capacity for natural adaptation for survival purposes, adjusting the sensibility of the senses to a change in the environment. When we enter a room with too loud noise, our ears respond by quickly adapting allowing us to be in such a loud room without becoming too crazed. The same happens when we enter a room that is brightly illuminated. When we leave such spaces our senses need time again to adapt to less sound and less lights. This is a major reason why one can see so many persons walking around art fairs that are not actually looking at individual artworks. One cannot blame the public and unjustified accuse them of being uneducated, when the main cause is the sheer overload to which the nowadays uniformity of presentations only adds.

What we have seen evolving is a tendency of organizers assuming the solution is to attract a larger audience by emphasizing the 'event' character of art exhibitions, art fairs or biennales, which has resulted in merely an appreciation of the events themselves and has evoked what we can name an 'event-audience' – people who are excited to walk around such an art-event as total phenomenon, to see friends and important personalities, to be seen at such an event, allowing to boast having been at such a particular event. Such an 'event-audience' does not come for the art, and is a natural result from human adaptation to the overload.

Art dealers should be aware that their lack of sales on art fairs cannot be blamed on the financial crisis alone. They should focus in stead on a real human dialogue with the collector and art lover through the artworks they present. An extra hidden problem in the art world is that artworks selected for presentation on art events (art fairs, biennales etc) often are based on a presumed small focus-span of the audience. There are not many art dealers and curators in the world who ever think of asking collectors or a general audience for their views. Fortunately knowing quite a few collectors, I know they are quite knowledgeable, while the attitude by many intermediaries of only talking to but not with them has annoyed collectors and unfortunately has minimized their enthusiasm for buying art. It is a strange result of the drive to educate, to promote and sell art that one has forgotten that art should be about experience and an experience cannot be transmitted to another person by mere words, the other person must be allowed to actually experience by himself. Though artworks currently are often screened for their socio-political contents and message, nobody seems concerned with the most fundamental socio-political meaning of art: what experience does the artwork offer another person?

Collectors have to appreciate that they are thrown back onto themselves to consider their own interest in art and their own motivations for collecting and commissioning artworks. Buying artworks should not be seen as a mere financial investment but much more an investment in one's own self with a direct impact on contemporary culture. It is about time to give much more attention to this original social importance of collecting which has nothing directly to do with personal status but the support of the further development of (individual) art and artists and by doing so to contribute substantially to the furthering of culture in the modern world. After the general promotion of artists entirely focussed on financial success, collectors cannot be blamed for being ignorant of the struggle of most artists and why their purchase of artworks in a direct and more social sense contribute to culture.

I am aware the described hidden problems – the awareness that buying artworks contributes directly to the creation and development of art and culture, and the disappearance of the spark of art – is probably mostly the case in Europe and the US, and a result of a too professional art-market existing about 50 years. Though in countries like Korea the art-market is much younger, globalization causes all market-problems to evolve much faster. Therefore, appreciating the very fast evolving seriousness of public and private interest in art in Korea, I hope this article will evoke the discussion in Korea to help prevent copying the mistakes, hidden or not, of the Western art market. Especially because Korea has a historical chance of becoming the main player in the East Asian art world.