

THE ONNASCH COLLECTION

INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ART COLLECTION

Media presentation: Tuesday, November 6, 11.30 am

Official opening: Wednesday, November 7, 19.30 pm

Exhibition dates: from 8 November 2001 to 20 January 2002

Curators: Manuel J. Borja-Villel, Antònia Maria Perelló.

Produced by: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

The Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona will show, for the first time in Spain, an extensive selection from the private collection of the German art dealer Reinhard Onnasch. This collection is a synthetic vision of some of the most important international aesthetic trends of the second half of the 20th century. The exhibition will be made up of 170 works, basically paintings, sculptures and installations, organised in chronological order.

Born in 1939 in Görlitz, an old city on the border between Germany and Poland, Reinhard Onnasch started out as an art dealer; as such he became interested in contemporary art. His collection, which he started to build up in the early-1970s, is a peculiar one, markedly different from most contemporary art collections of his time. This is partly explained by the fact that he started out as a dealer, but also by his predilection for antagonism and contrast, which helps to give his collection a singular profile, lacking in other contemporary art collections and making it a reference for international collections.

The Barcelona presentation of the Onnasch Collection begins with a representative sample of American Abstract Expressionism, spearheaded by Roberto Matta and Hans Hofmann. The overview of this artistic current is completed by the inclusion of works by Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhard, Cy Twombly, Clyfford Still and Morris Louis. The "Nouveau Réalisme" movement appeared in Europe in 1960, is represented here by the "dechirés" posters of Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé and the works of Dieter Roth, Daniel Spoerri, etc. At the same time, American Pop Art was beginning to erupt onto the scene, and this movement, too, figures large in the Onnasch Collection, represented by works by Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselman and Rosenquist.

The collection also features works by George Segal and the hyperrealist Duane Hanson. Conceptual and minimal art are represented by works by Daniel Buren, On Kawara, Kosuth, Larry Bell, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson and Sol LeWitt. Also represented are Dan Flavin, Richard Serra, Michael Heizer, Heerich and Mike Kelley. Finally, the exhibition includes two installations: Eduard Kienholz's masterpiece "Roxy's" (1960-61) and Jason Rhoades' "1/4 from 1:12 Perfect World" (2000).

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Reinhard Onnasch was born in 1939 in Görlitz, an old city on the border between Germany and Poland. He began to build up his collection in the early 70s, his interest in contemporary art being closely linked to his activity as an art dealer. His art gallery, which he opened in Berlin in 1968, focused on the work of recognised artists considered masters of modern art. Two years later, in 1970, he transferred the gallery to Cologne and began to concentrate on more contemporary art. In 1971 he opened another gallery in New York, where he presented such German artists as Gerhard Richter and Markus Lüpertz for the first time in the United States, and from where he also introduced to Germany the work of American artists like Hans Hofmann, George Segal and, later on, George Brecht and Richard Serra.

Reinhard Onnasch's collection is markedly different from those of most great contemporary art collections. This is partly explained by the fact that he started out as a dealer, but also by his interest in antagonism and contrast, revealed in his predilection for extreme artists working outside the mainstream. Here, Claes Oldenburg's painted plaster objects and colourful, plastic "soft sculptures" contrast with the work of George Brecht and Edward Kienholz. The collection also highlights Onnasch's interest in the furniture of Stefan Wewerka, made unnatural and non-functional due to their disproportion; in Michael Heizer's first conceptual circular objects; in Dan Flavin's neon installations; and in the early works of Richard Serra, whose delicate positioning and combinations evoke the force of gravity. It would be impossible to fit all this into a museum, and not only due to the sheer number of works, but, particularly, because of the constitution and nature of them and the structure of the collection itself.

The exhibition now presented at MACBA embraces works from the 1950s to the present, though the core of the Onnasch Collection is comprised of works from the 1960s. Abstract art was the dominant movement in Onnasch's Europe at that time, not only because of its apparent appropriateness to the general faith in progress and the emancipation of art, but also because the brutal Nazi verdict against abstraction and modern art and its imposition of an art of beautiful and recognisable appearance had led naturalism to fall into discredit as a form of artistic expression. American art of the 1950s sprang from a similar viewpoint. For the first time, New York and the abstract expressionist school had found in the work of such painters as Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still a genuinely American art, one which no longer responded to the European heritage and models.

And yet, the Onnasch Collection is not based on tendencies, movements or anti-movements, but on artistic individualities. Going from room to room in the exhibition, the visitor follows the particular route which Reinhard Onnasch traced out in the history of art. Here we find, side-by-side, different tendencies which emerged in the 1960s, beginning with pop art, which attracted Onnasch immediately due, particularly, to the freshness and freedom it emanated, so opposed to the solemnity of abstract expressionism. Onnasch acquired works by Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Jim Dine and Ed Ruscha, works expressing a new sensation of living, finding art in the everyday, in the supermarket, in advertising and in the street. Above all, they transmitted a great feeling of freedom. But Onnasch was also interested in the artistic proposals of Jacques de Villeglé, Raymond Hains, Christo, Daniel Spoerri and Jean Tinguely.

The exhibition continues with works illustrating two tendencies which cohabited in the 1970s: conceptual art and minimalism. There is, in the latent violence emanating from Richard Serra's heavy iron plates, and which also underlies the delicate balance of their arrangement, or their combination with another heavy piece, an emotional parallel with the work of Ed Kienholz. Even so, these works partake, formally and aesthetically, of the geometry of conceptual art, the most important positions of which are represented by Carl Andre, Dan Flavin and Michael Heizer's first objects, as well as being apparent in Erwin Heerich's geometric cardboard sculptures. Reinhard Onnasch was one of the first to collect works by Ed Kienholz, and his collection now includes some of this artist's most important early pieces, among them the remarkable *Roxy's*, 1961. Parallels could be drawn between

Dieter Roth's collages and works of decomposition and waste, of which Onnasch also possesses a large number, and Kienholz's works.

Onnasch never sought contact with the artist. As he himself says, "I try to view art as a result of the artist's work and to abstract it from the person. If I become involved with the person, I can't completely concentrate on the work." Neither do his ambitions include a museum for his collection. Since the late 1970s, and particularly since he gave up his activity as an art dealer to concentrate solely on his private collection, works from the Onnasch Collection have been loaned to form part of important international temporary exhibitions, whilst works are on long term loan in such European museums as the Neues Museum Weserburg of Bremen, the Kunsthalle in Hamburg and the Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach.

CATALOGUE TEXTS

**THE ONNASCH COLLECTION
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

■ *The Collector Leads the Way*
Petra Kipphoff

■ *About Collecting in the Age of Modernity*
Boris Groys

The Collector Leads the Way

Petra Kipphoff

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Let us begin with two pieces of art news from the summer of 2001, both relating to the topic of collectors and their achievements.

For his activity as a “significant art patron,” Erich Marx, a Berlin collector, was awarded the Grand Cross of Merit by the Federal Republic of Germany. Of the approximately 1000 works in his private collection, 183 are currently on view as long-term loans at Hamburger Bahnhof, a branch of the Berlin Nationalgalerie. Over the past five years more than a million visitors have seen these paintings and sculptures. This is what earned Marx the honor. An act of state, performed in appreciation of an art collector.

Sotheby’s of London announced the auction of the collections of William Hesketh Lever, 1st Viscount Leverhulme (1851-1925). Not only “one of the greatest collections of British art” was up for sale but Thornton Manor, the collector’s home and location of his collections, including outbuildings, stables, gardens and a park – an estate of about 60 acres all told. The end of a collection.

Erich Marx’s descendants will never find themselves in the plight of the last heirs of Viscount Leverhulme. Marx arranged everything during his lifetime, dividing his collection among family members and the nation, as an art patron, at least partially. Viscount Leverhulme was a passionate art lover, an aesthete, connoisseur and philanthropist who created a wonderful environment for himself with exquisite furniture, Chinese porcelain, clocks, antiques of every description, sculptures and paintings, especially early nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite works. After his wife’s death, the paintings went to the nation. When the family line died out, the remainder of the collections came under the gavel.

Two antipodal collecting temperaments, each naturally influenced by and typical of his era. Marx was a self-made man with a background in law. When he left southern Germany for West Berlin in the mid 1960s, a hothouse climate of a very special kind prevailed there. Much longer than elsewhere in the country, the consequences of the last war remained glaringly evident in the divided and isolated city. Yet it also offered attractive conditions and financial incentives for entrepreneurs. A lot of money could be made overnight on the West Berlin real estate market in the 1960s and ‘70s. Clever brokers and flexible bankers cooperated in the shadow of the Wall.

Earlier than in any other German city (excepting Cologne and its monolithic Peter Ludwig), there emerged a group of collectors whose reputation had spread beyond the city’s borders by the 1970s. They included Hans-Hermann Stober, Otto Pöhlmann, Georg Böckmann, Hartmut Ackermeier – and Reinhard Onnasch. All initially focussed on the local scene, discovering their first enthusiasms, collecting young Berlin artists of the day such as Markus Lüpertz, Georg Baselitz, Karl Horst Hödicke and Bernd Koberling. And then they made the leap westwards, which often, and rapidly, took them to New York.

Reinhard Onnasch was the youngest of these Berlin collectors of the first hour. He was born in 1939 in Görlitz, an old city in the difficult German-Polish frontier region. In 1949 he moved to Kiel in West Germany, graduated from high school, and went on in

the early 1960s to Berlin. Onnasch worked in the burgeoning field of housing construction and real estate, but in 1969 he also opened a gallery on Kurfürstendamm, surely anything but a side street. In other words, unlike the majority of today's collectors, Onnasch became involved in art at a very young age, with an eye to correlating his profession with his passion. "I approached the thing as a non-expert," he once admitted, and he soon discovered that loving art and making a living from it were two quite different things. Real estate continued to offer the security he needed, for, as Onnasch recalled, "I never was able to make a success of the gallery. The art I was committed to just didn't move."

Yet despite the disappointing sales record of his Berlin start, Onnasch had an excellent nose for business. In 1970 he moved to Cologne. Thanks largely to the inauguration of the Cologne Art Fair in 1968 and the activities of Peter Ludwig, whose major Pop Art collection was presented to an astonished public in 1969, Cologne seemed to be a promising venue for contemporary art. In the early 1970s Onnasch opened a second gallery, in New York, the first German to do so after the war. He brought German artists to America and American artists to Germany. The first Americans he exhibited were Hans Hofmann, Arakawa, Richard Artschwager, Edward Kienholz, George Segal and William Copley. George Brecht, Michael Heizer and Richard Serra followed. In New York, Onnasch showed the then unknown Gerhard Richter, whose forty works elicited no response and remained on the walls. Bernd Koberling, C. O. Paeffgen, Erwin Heerich, John Wesley, Lowell Nesbitt, Gianni Piacentino and Hubert Kiecol were next on the list.

The Onnasch Collection is very colorful, full of contrasts and possibly therefore more idiosyncratic than other comparable collections. This may be partly explained by the dry fact that Onnasch did not begin as a wealthy man, like the next generation of collectors and those of our own day, but as a dealer who initially hoped to earn a living from his gallery. But then there is his simple penchant for sharp contrasts. Claes Oldenburg's painted plaster objects and insouciantly garish soft sculptures are represented in many, still strikingly funny examples. Yet also present are Bill Copley and C. O. Paeffgen, two rare clowns and crafters of comic-based fine art, and finally George Brecht and Bruce Connor, two colleagues of Kienholz whose rank has never really been appreciated in Europe. In contrast, we find an interest in the strangely denatured, distorted, antifunctional furniture of Richard Artschwager and Stefan Wewerka, in Michael Heizer's early purist conceptual pieces, in Dan Flavin's fluorescent installations, and finally in early works by Richard Serra, steel plates or sheets of lead lying on the floor or propped against a wall or in a corner, in precarious positions and combinations that cause the viewer to ponder on the workings of gravity.

It is hard to imagine all these objects housed in a single building. But not only because of their number, like the Marx Collection or, to give a more recent example, the Brandhorst Collection, which is on the verge of exploding the still unfinished new building of the Munich Pinakothek of Modern Art. No, this is largely due to the constitution and character of key works and segments of Onnasch's collection.

Onnasch was one of the early advocates of Ed Kienholz, largely as a result of the special Berlin situation. In 1975 Kienholz was a guest of the Berlin Artists Program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and during his time there discovered that Berlin, with its war-scarred face, ruins and flea markets, was the place for him. After his fellowship was over he rented an apartment and regularly spent the winter

months in Berlin until his death in 1994. Similarly to Richard Serra, by way of Germany Kienholz won reputation and fame in other European countries and finally in America. The two major collectors of Kienholz's work are based in Berlin, and of the two, Onnasch has probably amassed the more significant collection. Again, not because of sheer numbers but because it includes some of the key early works and what many consider Kienholz's most important piece, the marvellous *Roxy's* (1961).

When *Roxy's* was first shown in Germany, in 1968 at the Kassel Documenta and the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, it was described in the catalogue as "bric-a-brac, goldfish, incense, disinfectant, perfume, music box, clothing, etc." What an understatement! *Roxy's* is a walk-in nightmare, furnished with the remnants of marginal lives – worn carpets, warped lamps, musty armchairs, a cloying music box, disintegrating crochetwork, defunct houseplants, and much more. Beneath a photo of General McArthur on the wall, the room is inhabited by humanoid mannequins composed of parts of display dummies, wire, artificial limbs, fiberglass, and objects such as a hot-water bottle, a garbage can, a burlap bag and a clock, and arranged in tortuous positions (such as draped over a sewing machine). Everything is second hand – the materials and the real-life scene they evoke.

The plot you can imagine spinning itself out in *Roxy's* is embodied by the protagonists themselves: "Madame" (with a wild boar's skull for a head), "Dianna Pool (Miss Universal)", "Cross-Eyed Jenny", "Miss Cherry Delight", "Five Dollar Billy", "Fifi" (a fallen angel), "Ben Brown", and a lady by the name of "Zoe". You see a battlefield of life, suffused by a mixture of mustiness and fragrances (which always were of great importance for Kienholz), with soft music playing somewhere in the background. Bertolt Brecht would have loved *Roxy's*. Formerly but no longer enterable, the piece is an attraction of the Onnasch Collection and the Neues Museum Weserburg in Bremen, where it has fascinated and irritated viewers since the inauguration of this collectors' museum in 1991. Without Kienholz the art of the environment would be inconceivable, from Ilya Kabakov's celebrated and endlessly repeated spaces of memory to everything that came after.

One might describe the assemblages of materials, the decomposition works of Diter Rot (a.k.a. Dieter Roth) of which Onnasch has a great number, and George Segal's white plaster figures in their home and work settings, as joining Kienholz's environments in a brotherhood of banal horror. The works of Richard Serra or Erwin Heerich would seem to occupy the opposite camp, despite a certain emotional affinity with Kienholz reflected in the latent violence contained in heavy iron plates in precarious balance or propped against another, heavier element.

Formally and aesthetically, however, these pieces belong to the geometrical abstractions of Conceptual Art. This field is represented in the Onnasch Collection by key examples by Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and early sculptures by Michael Heizer, and is also reflected in Erwin Heerich's corrugated cardboard pieces. The English Op artist Bridget Riley and her countryman, Land artist Richard Long, the former's virtually vibrating color-striped canvases and the latter's orderly, disordered arrangements of stones, also belong to this art of calculation in the widest sense. Because these conceptions in the spirit of number rely on the active, imaginative contribution of the viewer to release them from their occasionally puritan rigidity and reserve.

The case is very different with works which rely on the free flux of reality or surreality, and in which form and color are not delimited by the ruled line. And works of this

character and temperament in fact predominate in the collection of Onnasch, whose stay in New York and discovery of Pop were quite evidently an eye-opening experience. He came from a Europe in which abstract art dominated among discerning circles, not only because it reflected faith in progress and the emancipation of art but because Hitler's devastating verdict against abstraction and his edict prescribing an art of so-called natural beauty and popular understandability had brought discredit on realism as an art form. American art of the 1950s had also emerged from an attitude of distrust against realism, but it possessed its own, extremely vital character. New York and the eponymous Abstract Expressionist school, with painters like Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, had for the first time established an autonomous American art that was no longer beholding to any European heritage or ideal. It was a triumph. Yet for the following generation, it was also a reason to mount resistance, to venture in new directions, which this time were to have transatlantic reverberations.

The launching of Pop in the 1960s, a reaction to Abstract Expressionist pathos in particular and to the rest of the world in general, was a liberating action like none ever before seen in art history. And the world reacted promptly and enthusiastically. "The art of those years broke over us like a storm," wrote Peter Ludwig in the foreword to the catalogue *Kunst der sechziger Jahre*, then eloquently described how he was overwhelmed by Pop and its consequences. Onnasch, though similarly taken with Pop, was not so much interested in tendencies, movements and anti-movements as in individual personalities (as witnessed by his conversation with Dieter Honisch, in the exhibition catalogue *Aspekte der Kunst der sechziger Jahre - Aus der Sammlung Onnasch*). He acquired works by Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Jim Dine, Mel Ramos, Ed Ruscha and Larry Rivers, art derived from the mundane environment, supermarkets, billboards and the street, which radiated a new sense of freedom and vitality that is still as fresh as ever despite the many years and cheap thrills for all that have since passed into history. Onnasch was caught up in this mood, kept his eyes open, felt free to accept the unusual. And, with his decision in favor of Ed Kienholz, George Brecht and Bruce Connor, he made the move to the West Coast, to California, which for a long time was beneath the dignity of New York connoisseurs and for many Europeans still is.

With its approximately 1000 paintings and sculptures, its masterpieces and lesser works, the Onnasch Collection is one of the most significant of its kind and - thanks to its focus on Kienholz alone - has a quite unique profile, which truly cannot be said of every contemporary art collection. What I like about this collection is its freerunning taste, which is reflected not in any strict specialization but in a penchant for artists of the margins of the mainstream. Onnasch has intensively collected the erotico-comic paintings of Bill Copley, for instance, and with George Brecht he has focussed on an artist in whose surreal object-collages the sound of the Beat Generation and the California feeling for life reverberate. (All the more strange that one so seldom comes across Brecht in California museums.) Another sympathetic aspect of the Onnasch Collection is the extensive presence of an artist who seems entirely absent elsewhere on the scene: Gianni Pacentino. That needs a lot of character.

Onnasch refers to his collection as his "inventory," a dry word that conforms with the fact that he has always been a gallery owner foremost. He has never bought art for the home, but always for museums to which he hoped to make a sale. Although interested in extreme artists, he never, as he says, "sought contact with the artist." And why not? "I

try to view art as a result of the artist's work and to abstract it from the person. If I become involved with the person, I can't completely concentrate on the work." This attitude distinguishes Onnasch from his more recent collector colleagues, for whom the road to art must needs be paved by rubbing shoulders with the artist over a beer and the social round from studio to vernissage. And who, for that reason, frequently have no access to the art of a dead past.

Onnasch, in contrast, now finds it important to "work backwards," and in recent years has bought such artists as Hans Hofmann and Clyfford Still. Nor is he interested in social appearances or connections in which art and life are confused. Collectors, he feels, have of late come too much into the limelight anyway, not to mention those art buyers who have been in the business for a few years and then think they are ready for a major exhibition.

Onnasch is not one of those collectors who want a building, a museum exclusively reserved for their own collection. Although at one point he did have the idea in mind, when plans for the Neues Museum Weserburg in Bremen were under discussion, the conception soon changed to that of a museum to house several collections. The collectors' museum project has proven viable, despite the problems and occasional dissonances naturally faced by this community of diverse minds and ambitions, and especially by its director. A second museum of the type has since been inaugurated in Karlsruhe, on the basis of the Froehlich, Rentschler, Weishaupt and Grässlin collections. Onnasch, for his part, has conscientiously distributed his "inventory" as long-term loans among museums in Bremen, Hamburg, and Mönchengladbach; a considerable portion remains in the Cologne storage space, which other collectors also use for their surplus. Meanwhile, at Onnasch's home in Berlin, the lady condemned by Duane Hanson to forever remain under her hair dryer sits, smoking.

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Museums, audiences and art have profited from the collector's readiness to lend his works, naturally on the basis of sound contracts. Will this continue to be the case? Only Onnasch knows. And at this point, he understandably prefers not to talk about it. For a collector, everything is in flux anyway. When eleven collectors joined forces in 1991 to create a museum of contemporary art at the Bremen Weserburg, it became obvious for the first time in Germany that collectors, at least collectors of contemporary art, have little desire to sit at home admiring their Darlings (thus the title of an exhibition from private collections scheduled this summer at Schloss Morsbroich near Leverkusen). No, they would rather move them and show them.

In addition, as has also recently become evident in Germany, many collectors not only wish to be visible on the scene but to exert an influence on arts policy. For instance by requesting a publicly financed building for their works of art, or at least their own museum department on its own floor. Take Lothar-Günter Buchheim, who for years negotiated with cities and museum directors about the accommodation (not donation) of his Expressionist and curiosities collection, but repeatedly withdrew at the last moment. In the meantime he has been able to celebrate the inauguration of his Bavarian State Buchheim Museum on Starnberger See. An example to the contrary would be Bernhard Sprengel, a patron who donated his collection of classical modern art to his native city

of Hannover, and who also subsidized the cost of building a museum, which opened in 1979.

What is an art collection? "Every accumulation of natural or artificial objects which is temporarily or permanently removed from the cycle of economic activities..." writes historian Krystof Pomian in his tract *The Origin of the Museum - Concerning Collecting* (1986). Pomian then adds that the paradoxical thing about collections is that "they possess an exchange value without having a use value." A definition that explains why the subject of collectors and the public sphere is currently so interesting and controversial. Because in the same period as government support for museums has stagnated, the number of collectors and their presence in national and state museums has increased. An ideal situation, one might be tempted to think. But also a problematical one, as practice has occasionally shown. In any case, it is an opportunity and a situation for which no hard and fast rules exist, because what we are dealing with is a well-nigh undefinable subject and, concomitantly, with personalities who resist classification.

At what point does an accumulation of works of art become a collection? Walter Benjamin, who had no opportunity to accumulate material property, collected his thoughts, the fruits of his reading, and his impressions. In his book *Passagenwerk* (edited posthumously in 1982), he writes, "The decisive thing about collecting is that the object is divorced from all of its original functions, in order to enter the closest relationship imaginable to others of the same kind. This is the diametrical opposite to utilization, and belongs in the strange category of completeness." A sensitive, cool statement on what has since become a hot topic.

"A collection begins at the point when it no longer fits into the house," says the collector Frieder Burda prosaically but with healthy self-confidence. Scion of an influential Offenburg publishing family, Burda has previously exhibited portions of his collection (which focusses on Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Arnulf Rainer) or lent them to museums. Now he is planning to build his own museum, in the city of Baden-Baden where he resides, next to the Staatliche Kunsthalle. His collection, Burda states with refreshing candor, is a "festive illumination for my ego," and this festively illuminated art event, he believes, should be open to anyone who wishes to enjoy it.

The history of collecting in postwar Germany, especially as regards contemporary art, began with Karl Ströher. An industrialist of Darmstadt, Ströher began in the 1950s with Kandinsky and Klee, the German Expressionists, with Willy Baumeister, Rolf Nesch and

E. W. Nay, with Henry Moore and Lynn Chadwick. One senses a sympathetic openness, but also a certain indecisiveness, when one leafs through the catalogue of this collection today. The collection went on public view in Darmstadt, in 1970, under the then up-to-date title *Bildnerische Ausdrucksformen* [Forms of Visual Expression]. Subsequently the storm of Pop broke over Ströher, as it had over Peter Ludwig. In New York he purchased, en bloc, the Kraushaar Collection, the earliest and most spectacular collection of American Pop Art, in which all the great names from Johns to Warhol were represented. But Ströher did something else remarkable: in 1969 he bought, from the artist, a group of works known as the "Beuys Block," comprising two-thirds of Beuys's entire oeuvre, which he pledged to exhibit, donate or sell only in its entirety. Ströher desired to make his entire collection available to the Darmstadt Museum in an annex, but the state government of Hessen refused to approve construction. The Pop collection of Ströher, who never wanted to be a public figure, was sold after his death

and is now, in large part, in the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. The “Beuys Block” was acquired by the nation for the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt.

Peter Ludwig was born in 1925, and was thus 35 years younger than Ströher. Except for their shared love of American Pop, the two collectors could hardly have been more different. Ludwig and his wife, Irene, both had degrees in art history, and apparently loved the activity of collecting as much as the things collected. Yet rather than collecting for their own benefit, they did so solely for selected museums. They acquired ancient Greek vases, Aztec ceramics, incunabula and codices, Meissen porcelain, paintings of classical modernism, and contemporary art from Europe, North and South America, Eastern Europe and Asia. And they distributed these treasures from Vienna to Basel, Aachen, St. Petersburg and Budapest, from what was then still East Berlin to Cologne. From their base in Cologne, the Ludwigs continued unswervingly to expand their family bastion.

The Ludwigs’ collection of Pop Art was initially displayed in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, which itself was housed in a sort of emergency quarters. Then, in 1986, came the move of the 284 works of art – donated in the meantime to the city – to a new building next to Cologne Cathedral, which bore the triple name of Wallraf, Richartz and Ludwig. In the winter of 2000 the Wallraf Richartz Collection was shifted to a new building, and the end of 2001 will witness the opening, or reopening, of the Museum Ludwig, based principally on donations or long-term loans from Irene and Peter Ludwig. Never had the elbowing out of competitors produced such a harvest as in Cologne. People justifiably spoke of a collector’s empire, which, since Peter Ludwig’s death in 1996, has been administrated by his wife Irene.

Ludwig, as regards both stature and hegemonial claims, belonged to the era of Helmut Kohl. The collectors active in parallel with or after him, men, and in the meantime, women of a later period, tend obviously to be contemporaries of Gerhard Schröder. While idealists launch their attacks on globalization at world economic summits, these collectors jet between New York and Basel, Venice, Berlin and London, stopping over in galleries and studios, at auctions and vernissages. They are individualists whose commitment is accompanied by a bank account to match, who will eventually open their own little museum, do something for society without asking for any remuneration in return. In addition to Frieder Burda, mention must be made of Ingvild Goetz, who has had a house built for herself in Munich by architects Herzog and de Meuron (long before they were everybody’s darling). Goetz began with Arte Povera, and her interest has continued to focus on young and very recent art. Like Reinhard Onnasch, she too began as a gallery owner, although unlike him, Goetz was never compelled to make a living from the business.

Others shift and send their “collection blocks” from museum to museum. For instance the Stuttgart collector Josef Froehlich, who has concentrated on the usual suspects of contemporary art, from Georg Baselitz to Rosemarie Trockel and Carl Andre to Andy Warhol, with a particular emphasis on Bruce Nauman (not exactly an outsider’s choice either). The exhibition of his collection in 1996 in three European countries, four cities and seven museums, was a source of special pride to Froehlich. He and the other globalizers have naturally learned much from Guiseppe Panza di Biumo, the Italian count, who for decades has mentally and partly moved his wonderful collection of contemporary American art beyond Pop from his home base in Varese to such antipodal places as Mönchengladbach and Los Angeles and back. At present a cooperation is in

place between Panza di Biumo and Thomas Krens, or with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

Froehlich, on the other hand, is one of the pillars of the Collectors' Museum in Karlsruhe, which shares a former gunpowder factory with the Media Museum. In addition to Froehlich's, loans have come from the Rentschler, Weishaupt and Grässlin families, as a rule on the basis of ten-year contracts. The interesting thing about this constellation is that all of these highly motivated and knowledgeable collectors originate from southwestern Germany, from the vicinity of Karlsruhe. A fact that reflects a chapter of German economic history.

Baden-Württemberg is the most highly industrialized state in the country. Indicators include not only such names as Mercedes and Bosch but numerous medium-range businesses, especially in the field of machinery and machine tooling, which have been in family ownership for generations. At the same time, the region possesses a strong cultural awareness and is proud of a great educational system which includes such venerable universities as Heidelberg, Freiburg and Tübingen. This is a situation which is beneficial to art, as the rest of Germany has begun to realize in recent years.

The situation in Hamburg, the great harbor and trade center that reputedly has more millionaires within its borders than any other city in Europe, is different. In Hamburg, wealth has never been conspicuously displayed. Consequently, this former hub of the European art trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries probably has more major collections than meet the eye. Although occasionally, some of them do. Such as the Minimal Art collection of Klaus Lafrenz, which has become one of the foundations of the Bremen Weserburg. Or the significant collection of Klaus and Erika Hegewisch, in the meantime focussed entirely on drawings and prints from Goya to Munch and Picasso, which has justifiably been accorded a special changing exhibitions space at the Hamburg Kunsthalle. Such collections have not been gathered as "festival illuminations for an ego."

A still different case is presented by Berlin, the old and new capital. "Berlin is not a collectors' town," says Onnasch, the collector from and in Berlin. And he is right. In the 1920s and '30s great collections, of both classical and contemporary art, grew and flourished in Berlin, thanks above all to the activity of Jewish collectors. The brilliant museum director, Wilhelm von Bode, was a master at accommodating private and public interests, advising collectors, and enriching the city's museums. All of this was destroyed, wiped out in the name of Adolf Hitler. The brief, intense postwar burgeoning of collecting in Berlin has since become past history. Traces of it are at most, if highly visibly, present in the collection of Erich Marx (to whom a festschrift was devoted on his 80th birthday), but after Marx came the void. Still, who can say what figures might appear in a group portrait of German collectors taken in the year 2010?

"The Collector Leads the Way," declared the title of an enthusiastic introduction by Gert von der Osten, the Cologne museum director, to the catalogue of the first presentation of the Ludwig Collection in 1969. Nothing would work without collectors, admitted the critics when the third Kunsthalle building, the "Galerie der Gegenwart" [Gallery of the Contemporary Age], was inaugurated in Hamburg in 1996, and people realized that about 60 percent of the works on display were loans from collectors. Onnasch was among them. In fact, he is perhaps the most important lender in Hamburg, with works by Richard Serra and Robert Rauschenberg, a large group of Oldenburg pieces, and five paintings by Clyfford Still. If many of these are now on view in the Onnasch exhibition in Barcelona and Porto, this is part of the contract, and the rooms in

Hamburg will not be empty. On the other hand, the Hamburg Kunsthalle feels obligated to provide a suitable home for collectors' works, naturally including expenses for curatorial and art historical attentions.

"Nowadays time flows faster in the museum than outside its walls," writes Boris Groys in his 1997 volume of essays *Die Logik der Sammlung – Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters* [The Logic of the Collection – The End of the Museum Age]. The museum age, as we know it from Thomas Bernhard's wonderful story "Old Masters," may indeed be at an end, for in none of the world's great museums is it still possible to spend the day alone with one's favorite picture. On the other hand, a new era is beginning for museums, an era that confronts them with new challenges but that also provides greater opportunities for participation in cultural policy affairs. How this era will look and what consequences it will have, is bound to depend largely on how the individual and the *res publica*, the collector and the museum define their relationship to one another.

About Collecting in the Age of Modernity

Boris Groys

Since the beginning of modernity at the latest, art that can be considered serious, challenging, valuable, or “high” has been produced principally for collections, public or private. This grounding of art in the practice of collecting has profoundly shaped both the strategies of art making and people’s perception of modern art. Producing art under these circumstances implies creating things that differ from things in general, as regards both the duration and the context of their societally guaranteed existence. In Western cultures most objects are looked upon as having a finite existence, and we accept their finitude. This is true of all of the things we surround ourselves with, even those we consider especially beautiful. Works of art in a collection represent the sole significant exception to this rule. The act of collecting implies a promise that the works selected will be preserved and will be spared the fate to which everything else is subject.

The development of modernity has been accompanied by continual argument about the criteria that distinguish art from non-art, or, put differently, about what things deserve to be included in a collection and what things do not. Yet every public or private collection engenders its own, frequently idiosyncratic context of perception, and by so doing, it establishes certain criteria for its continuation. As this implies, a work of art that fits into one collection may fit less well into another. In other words, the aesthetic quality of a work is a factor that is dependent on context, on the particular collection concerned. True collecting does not mean simply acquiring at random objects that are considered aesthetically valuable. Rather, certain collecting strategies open new points of view, which enable us to find aesthetic qualities where we previously had not expected them. Collectors, if they are good collectors, are no less innovative and indispensable than artists for the viability of art.

Thus a collection serves as more than a passive repository for art of the past. Each collection contains the active potential for its own future continuation. A collection is a project that is oriented to the future. It is by definition utopian, futuristic – it contains the promise of being perpetually incomplete. Now, this circumstance in turn puts contemporary artists under the pressure of having to think like a collector, and to continually produce new works that, though they have yet to enter a collection, could very well form its continuation. We often tend to think of collecting as a conservative activity that leaves no room for the new. Actually, the opposite is true. It is only through a collection, a potentially infinite series of objects, that the future is invoked. To make innovation possible, a place within culture has always had to be reserved for its acceptance. A collection represents just such a place, whose potential expansion provides space for what has yet to be collected. The dynamic of modern art can be explained largely in terms of this openness to the future represented by modern art collections.

No doubt this is a conception of art collecting that did not exist before the modern age, but it is nevertheless our own. The modern age has drawn all sorts of conclusions from this conception, the most far-reaching of which was obviously the ready-made. And indeed, if entry into an art collection transforms an object into a work of art, then ultimately anything can become a work of art. The sole criterion is the collector’s decision to accept a certain object. Of course it can be argued that such an act, in itself, can never suffice, and

that the character of the work remains indispensable. But what we wish to focus on is the regulative idea of the modern art collection – an idea that, even though it may not be practicable to the final degree, nevertheless determines the intrinsic dynamic of art in the modern age. As a result, the distinction between artist and collector, which long occupied the modernist imagination, is potentially negated. Traditionally, the collector's eye was considered domineering in that it triumphed over the artist's laborious efforts. The collector had it within his power to judge and evaluate artistic work and either accept or reject it. And above all, his perception had the power to put a price on the work.

In the course of modernity, however, the positions of artist and collector within the temporal economy of perception have changed. Earlier, the considerable investment of labor, time and effort needed to create a traditional work of art stood in what was, for the collector, a highly favorable relationship to the time invested in its appreciation or consumption. After the artist had labored long and hard on his work, the collector evaluated it effortlessly, at a glance. This is the source of the traditional superiority of the collector over the artist/painter as supplier of pictures.

In the meantime, the invention of photography and the ready-made have brought the artist closer to the collector in terms of the temporal economy of perception, because these techniques enable him to produce imagery in a split second. Video art faces collectors with an even greater challenge. The camera that produces moving pictures can take them automatically, without the artist having to invest any time at all in the process. This provides the artist with a surplus of time, for the collector now must invest more time in viewing and evaluating the imagery than the artist required to produce it. Until quite recently, it was often argued that the rise of ready-made art, photography and media art would lead to a glut in collections and a reduction in their value. The hermetic space of the collection seemed destined to be inundated by an ocean of technically mass-produced imagery.

Yet we should remember that the activity of collecting creates the stage on which modern subjectivity can play itself out, through art objects ranging from the handmade to the technological. This is by no means to denigrate subjectivity. One would have to proceed on highly dubious metaphysical premises to reach the conclusion that staged subjectivity is somehow worse or more deficient than "true" subjectivity. This type of subjectivity is produced; in fact, it is the true art product of modernity. And as a thing produced it is no less "real" than any other product of civilization. In this context, the free space outside the museum – so-called "reality" or "life" – is experienced from this subjective point of view as a space for potential collecting. The result is a specific, well-known, and eminently modern passion for collecting.

Viewed from the well-lighted but constricted interior spaces of a collection, reality does in fact present itself as the sum of everything that has "not yet" been collected, been perceived, presented and appreciated as art – and that until then must remain hidden in the dark. Things in the outside world appeal to the collector to be transformed, redeemed, reawakened, brought to light. They are in distress, and the art collector feels subjectively called to rescue them from their distress and bring them into the safe haven of the interior space of the collection. Since the beginning of the last century this missionary spirit has also impelled the avantgardes, which have protested over and over again that something else, something "different" has yet to be collected, represented, publicized, explained and saved. The internal logic of collecting manifests itself, in other words, in the premise that declaring a thing to possess the quality of difference – and hence newness in the context of a museum-style collection – suffices to lend this different thing an aesthetic value. Whenever a

politically, aesthetically or otherwise motivated demand is made to accept the different, the suppressed, or the excluded into a collection, this demand is really quite superfluous, because it is already a premise in the internal logic of collecting.

Admittedly, the figure of the collector raises feelings both of admiration and deep mistrust in the public mind. He is looked upon as someone who immerses himself in his collection, enters the space where his treasures are kept and shuts the door behind him, isolating himself from the general public and creating an unbridgeable gap between himself and them. The collector is infused with a passionate love of his personal treasures, his strictly private property, and therefore absconds from the context of general social communication. A collection creates a distinction, a breakdown in communication, a heterogeneity in the midst of the homogeneous space of modern mass society. By the same token, the values that accumulate in a collection are removed from the universal exchange of commodities, the boundless flow of modern capital.

It is no coincidence that the figure of the collector has been so hated by many modern authors. Georges Bataille, for instance, enthusiastically describes in many of his writings the loss of personal treasures, wealth, luxury goods – the dissolution of private collections in the infinite exchange of all values. The collector is the enemy of the all-encompassing homogeneous space of the unlimited exchangeability of all things. He creates a special, isolated space for the things he loves, thus giving these treasures a unique fate, different from that of everything else. This is why many people look upon the act of collecting as unjust and arbitrary, which gives them reason to deplore the collector. Occasionally this hate is manifested directly, in government-approved, legal expropriation. But normally it takes the form of a vague disapproval, directed against those who would alter the fate of some things as opposed to the rest – and who, above all, would establish value differences. In the contemporary period, art is generally understood as a form of social communication, and it is considered self-evident that everyone wishes to communicate and gain communicative recognition – if cultural differences can no longer be leveled, at least they should be communicated. Being different from other people is no longer considered bad. Yet it is still considered bad and antisocial to withdraw from general communication.

Any difference that strives to make itself understood to others, to be communicative, is not different enough. Modern art of the past century was so radical and interesting precisely because it consciously withdrew from normal social communication – it excommunicated itself, if you will. The “incomprehensibility” of avantgarde art was intentional, and not merely the result of a breakdown in communication. Language, including visual language, can be used not only as a medium of communication, but as a medium of strategically planned non-communication or, again, self-excommunication, i.e. a conscious withdrawal from the society of communicators. And this strategy of self-excommunication is quite legitimate. An artist might wish to erect a linguistic barrier between himself and others in order to gain critical detachment from society. The autonomy of art is nothing other than this movement towards self-excommunication. It is a matter of obtaining power over differences, a strategy of producing new differences instead of overcoming or communicating old differences.

By no means does the autonomy of art merely consist in a self-contained art market or a special art system among many other social systems, as Niklas Luhmann recently stated in his book with the characteristic title *Kunst der Gesellschaft*. Rather, art may be defined in terms of its ability, not merely to form a special field of social activity, but to divide society, interrupt its homogeneity. The modern art collection, as mentioned, offers a particularly

straightforward way to avoid the imperative of total communicability, to create a private space of self-isolation. The modernist period, in which art has become hermetic in many respects, provides a special opportunity to build an art collection that is largely sealed off from the rest and enables the collector to assume an aesthetic and critical distance from society as a whole.

Yet in one of his functions, the collector remains indispensable to the general public. This function consists in naming the price of an individual work of art. This is by no means a simple operation. Establishing a certain monetary value for a work of art gives the collector the unique opportunity to quantify his aesthetic judgment, to differentiate and precisely define it. In the absence of the money code, aesthetic judgments would be reduced to a simple “yes/no” proposition, a “good” or “bad”, an “I like it” or “I don’t like it.” Beyond these binaries there would be no space for a differentiated evaluation.

Now, naming a price for a work of art provides an opportunity to evaluate it much more precisely and subtly. For example, a person might say “yes” to a certain work priced at DM 2000, but “no” when the price tag is DM 2500. This decision need not even mean that the person making the judgment actually intends to buy the work for the price named, if he had the opportunity. Rather, it marks an invisible value limit which the viewer sets between yes and no – a limit beyond which the aesthetic judgment flips over into its opposite. Naturally this mark is on the one hand quite precise, yet on the other very vague – how does our hypothetical viewer know what distance separates yes from no, and how to this distance can be quantified?

There are no “objective” laws of supply and demand governing the price of a work of art, of which only a single example usually exists. Every other consideration affecting its price – the artist’s name, reputation, etc. – ultimately proves to be highly problematical. The number designating the sum of money a viewer “would be prepared to pay for this work of art” is in fact an expression of an inherent, purely subjective aesthetic feeling which at the same time, if one may say so, is an inherent, subjective monetary feeling. When a work of art is acquired for a collection, a subjective aspect of money manifests itself, an intrinsic and obscure link between quantity and emotion which is necessarily overlooked in the “objective” functionings of the economy and which reveals itself at most indirectly, in such affectionate terms as “my dear” or “my treasure” – which immediately prompt one to ask, “dear – but how dear,” or “treasure – but how large?”

This inquiry into the precise quantity implied in a feeling of affection is usually suppressed and remains unspoken in interpersonal relations. Not so in the case of art collections. One may not really know whether a certain work of art actually cost DM 2000. But one senses it. This, again, is a strange, enigmatic feeling – an intuitive sense of the hidden presence of money in everything around us. This sense can be trained by asking oneself, How do I feel in the presence of objects that cost so and so much? We do often ask ourselves, and others, such questions, as for instance when entering a strange house: How much do you suppose this house cost? The question is not really aimed primarily at finding out how wealthy the owner is or what the real estate prices in the neighborhood are like. Rather, it is prompted by the feeling of being, let us say, in a house that cost a million (in what currency basically does not matter). And we want to know whether or not this feeling of ours is deceptive.

The sense of being in the presence of a certain sum of money overcomes us everywhere in our civilization – in restaurants, museums, boutiques, even in the wilderness, because considerable value is now attached to the natural environment. Seen in this light,

the monetary feeling has become the most fundamental feeling of all. Yet this does not imply that naming the price of a work of art means abandoning the aesthetic experience and emotion, and getting down to business. No, when we look at a picture we ask ourselves, in some inmost recess of our being, How do I feel in the presence of this picture? We may recall similar pictures and the inward feelings they aroused – and what they cost. But we are also put in mind of houses we were invited to, trips we took, restaurants we dined in – and we recall the feelings associated with these things and the prices we paid for them. So we can say that the experiences of a lifetime are summed up in the estimate that a certain picture cost DM 2000. In the presence of this picture we feel just as we would feel in the presence of that sum of money, not a penny more nor less.

A friend of mine – an artist – once told me that no art critic could ever understand a work of art because really understanding a work of art would mean buying it for one's collection, and not merely writing about it. Naming the price we are willing to pay for a work from our own pocket is the only hermeneutics that does justice to art. Nothing reveals the extremely complicated role which money plays in our contemporary mental budget more clearly than the deeply paradoxical feeling with which the contemporary viewer diagnoses the presence of money in things.

Yet since the inception of the classical avantgarde, precisely those pictures or images which are poor in signs of worldly success, magnificence, "external" richness, have had the greatest chance of being diagnosed as places where the really big money resides. In this case, the lack of an immediate sense of money is paradoxically interpreted as a sign of the covert presence of money. Just as a medieval monk sitting on the bare floor of his cold cell could say, Here, too – meaning especially here – is God, today we say in the presence of a painting in which no sign of a valued artistic tradition is evident, This, too, costs money – and probably a lot for that very reason. Here money becomes an omnipresent inner force that manifests itself precisely in the seemingly least important, least prepossessing things.

Without this new, genuinely modern mystique of money, modern art would be inconceivable, because it can and intends to prove its intrinsic value without resorting to superficial, visual values. Modern art seems to reveal the deepest secret of money: The true worth of things can never be judged by their external appearance – money is an enigma within an enigma. Consequently, the true adversary of Marx in the last century was actually Duchamp. The art of Duchamp, Warhol and their successors was a paradisiacal art, in that it denied that human labor was unavoidable and instead promised to recognize and manifest the monetary value pre-existing in every thing and every human being, i.e. before any additional effort of labor. As Beuys said, Every person is an artist – by which he actually meant, Every human being is a work of art. Duchamp's ready-mades offered the promise of a "real utopia," one that could measure itself against the promises of communism and that represented an effective alternative to Marxism: A promise made to every individual that he or she can become part of a collection.

Yet we must not forget that while the individual artist's investment of time and labor in producing a work of art has continually decreased in the course of modernism, this is only because more and more effort has simultaneously been invested in building art collections – in constructing spaces to house them, in preserving and restoring the works, etc. Thus the production of value above and beyond that produced by labor ultimately turns out to be an illusion. It is not so that "poor", mundane things manifest their hidden value, including their monetary value, as a result of being raised to the "ideal" status of art. Rather, the same added value is ascribed to the thing collected which is subtracted from the labor

invested in accumulating and storing the collection into which it is admitted. This conclusion, by the way, can form a basis for the development of a political economy of modern art that goes beyond vague and non-committal talk about “symbolic capital” and a “critique of institutions,” by defining the borderline between art and non-art not as something “ideally” determined but as something “materially” extant. No adequate evaluation of the claim of modern art to represent a paradisaical creation beyond labor can be made without factoring the work invested in accumulating art collections into the equation.

Now, it is very frequently stated that art prices are dictated solely by “the market,” which supposedly leaves individual collectors very little room for autonomous decisions. Yet this belief in a uniform market is illusionary. There can be no uniform market for the simple reason that there is no uniform definition of art. If an artist decides to strive for financial success in the commercial, media-disseminated mass culture, he must necessarily adopt a certain range of content and a certain aesthetic form in which to convey it. If he wishes to convey more “provocative” content in a more “difficult” form, he can automatically expect his audience to be smaller, a minority and, if you will, elitist audience, but one which is also quite willing to pay an individually defined price for “difficult” art of this type.

So when people talk about “the art market” in general, they risk overlooking the immense variety it contains. Commercial movies, television programs, pop music, advertising and other art forms such as popular literature function under conditions most similar to those governing general commodity exchange. The greatest financial success is achieved by authors and works which prove most attractive to the largest audience. The individual financial contribution that the individual consumer of such works is willing to pay is small. Therefore the financing of such enterprises depends on the size of the edition or the box-office proceeds. Accordingly, these arts tend, both substantially and formally, to repetition, imitation, tautology. They appeal to themes that “interest people” and employ aesthetic techniques that “appeal to people.” And as this implies, such arts attempt to determine what and how “people” have always thought and felt, in order to tailor the art to the results of their investigation.

Now, there are many other arts that are subject to entirely different criteria of financial success – even though market success may also be involved. Paintings, sculptures, and in the meantime ready-mades and photographs, are sold not in large editions but as unique specimens or in very small editions. In this case, it is not wide dissemination but rarity that counts. The greater the substantial and formal originality and uniqueness of such works, the greater success they can be expected to have among a small circle of collectors, curators and critics, and the higher prices they will draw. What is appreciated in such special artistic objects is not their popularity on the open market but just the opposite, their inaccessible, enigmatic, “difficult” character. In fact their very lack of success on an open market accessible to a broad public can lead to recognition and high evaluation in the closed market of initiates and connoisseurs. By the same token, if an artwork does too well on the open market, its value decreases on the specialist market. Success on one market leads to failure on another, and vice versa. Consequently, there is no such thing as a uniform market. People who speak of “the” market – and especially of “the” art market – are laboring under a new, universalizing delusion. Contemporary markets are every bit as fragmented as contemporary society as a whole.

Accordingly, there are no universal criteria for determining prices, only particular or partial ones, and these are often based on purely private decisions. These partial criteria are,

as mentioned, basically identical with the corresponding aesthetic criteria. The conflict between the aesthetic and the economic is entirely fictitious: It arises only when different markets are confused with each other and works that circulate in one market are judged by criteria that hold for other markets.

So basically we can speak of “high art” only in connection with those arts which produce individual, discrete objects which for that reason remain inaccessible to a broad public, both aesthetically and economically. This is why the search for aesthetic originality is concentrated principally in those arts that do not rely on wide dissemination, which in turn enables them to radically and consistently represent what is known as aesthetic modernity. The visual artist can financially survive in contemporary civilization only when his art appeals to no more than a few – a handful of curators, dealers, collectors and critics. This orientation to the tastes of a few has lent visual art an aesthetic dynamic of which the arts whose financial success depends on the tastes of the many can only dream. Neither in literature nor in film have aesthetically “difficult” forms and techniques been able to establish themselves. The general public has not been able to recognize its own face in these difficult works.

In consequence, the contemporary art that has emerged from the twentieth-century avantgardes has become increasingly suspected of being anti-democratic, elitist, even conspiratorial. Influential authors such as Bourdieu or Baudrillard reject contemporary post-avantgarde art as being little more than an economic strategy that serves a pseudo-elitist taste and therefore eludes democratic legitimation. Now, what this argument does is criticize a closed market in the name of an open one, just as earlier, in the days of Clement Greenberg and the Frankfurt School, open markets were criticized in the name of a closed, elitist market whose clientele consisted of despairing intellectuals. What justifies such violent ideological attacks on the closed market? Why should not a despairing intellectual be allowed, if he has earned enough money, to invest this money in nurturing his despair without suffering from a guilty conscience? From a purely economic point of view, criticizing society is certainly one legitimate lifestyle among many – and thus has the right to be catered to by a market that provides corresponding goods.

Yet the currently widespread anti-elitist polemics are not actually directed primarily against “the rich” in the name of “the poor,” as it may appear at first glance. Being elitist is often confused with being wealthy. Even Clement Greenberg speaks about advanced art as being chained by a golden leash to the wealthy, who are in a position to appreciate this art and financially support it. Yet there are sufficient examples in the history of modern art to show that the few who support advanced art need not necessarily be the wealthiest. An artist can survive – though it may be at the subsistence level – when he has the financial support of a small circle of friends and patrons.

So the polemics against the elitist character of post-avantgarde art is directed not primarily against the rich, but against the sheer existence of closed markets that cut themselves off from open, mass markets. There is a deep mistrust of such isolated, closed minority markets, despite the fact that no one can say why an open, mass market should be better, or for that matter worse, than a minority market. This rejection of minority markets cannot be explained or justified in purely economic terms. In the context of economic rationale, there can be no difference between a market success that is “true” because legitimated by the open market, and one that is “false” because it takes place on an elitist market. We must conclude that the rejection of minority markets is of a purely ideological nature.

It would seem that a considerable and quite energetic fraction of current public opinion has projected the universal, utopian hopes they once placed, say, in socialism onto open, expanding, globalised, all-encompassing markets. This religious-ideological sublimation of the homogeneous market that links “people” everywhere with one another and enables an unlimited “communication” of everyone with everyone else, is the only way to explain the allergic reaction of certain authors to the obvious fragmentation of markets – particularly cultural markets. Although society has since learned to respect indigenous, “natural” minorities such as ethnic ones, it instinctively continues to reject “artificial” minorities whose cohesion is based on exclusive aesthetic preferences. This is why success on such exclusive markets is also rejected, for moral and ideological reasons, as being anything from dubious to charlatan.

What becomes manifest here is the intrinsic unity of aesthetic, ideological and economic strategies. Today it is no longer a matter, as it once was, of an opposition between commercial and non-commercial, market versus non-market, or of art-as-commodity versus true art, but of quite distinct and often even opposing market strategies that conform with the conditions of a pluralistic, fragmented, heterogeneous market. When artists and critics choose a particular aesthetic option, they simultaneously choose the market on which this option could have an economic chance – and exclude themselves from other markets in the process. This is why so many discussions on the aesthetics and economics of art seem so confused, and have to be carefully analyzed in order to understand them at all. When some people argue for open markets on which autonomous art can supposedly hold its own, they often do so on the tacit assumption of what type of art can survive on such open markets – a type of art with which they covertly sympathize. The same is admittedly true of those who advocate the protection of limited, exclusive markets, because they too have their aesthetic preferences and want them to have a financial chance.

So it would be extremely naive to argue that individual works of art must prove themselves in open competition on a free market, because this “one” free market does not even exist. Perhaps the most intriguing thing about modern art collections, if they are informed with sufficient passion and logic, is this: They withdraw from the general exchange of commodities, form black holes in the contemporary economy, subvert the homogeneous dictatorship of the market through personal evaluations and decisions, and make available to subjectivity that language which it tends to consider the most unlikely of all – the language of money.