Neoliberalism, Institutionalism, and Art

Declan Hoy, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Patrick Mahon, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

© Declan Hoy 2021

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd)

Part of the Aesthetics Commons, Contemporary Art Commons, and the Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons

**Recommended Citation**

[https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/8288](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/8288)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact wlsadmin@uwo.ca.
Abstract

As contemporary art has expanded to encompass further disparate activities under its umbrella, the various institutions of art can be looked to as the only constant and defining characteristic of art. These institutions are often seen in sharp contrast to spontaneous collectivism, the real, and radical creativity—attributes deeply valued within contemporary art. This creates a troubling situation in which institutions are seen as limiting the possibility of what art could be, and artworks are perceived as needing to escape the very institutions which define them in order to be deemed worthy. In this structure, contemporary art follows and validates the logic of neoliberalism and its doctrine of anti-institutionalism, radical creativity, and hyper individualism. This text looks at a short overview of neoliberalism, the economic impact of neoliberalism on artists, and examines the work of artist Renzo Martins in relation to the issues of neoliberalism and institutionalism in art.

Keywords

Contemporary art, institutional theories of art, anarcho-realist maxim, neoliberalism.
Summary for Lay Audience

As contemporary art has expanded to encompass nearly any and all activities under its umbrella, the various institutions of art—galleries, art schools, established ways of behaving and doing—can be looked to as the only constant and defining characteristic of art. These institutions are often seen in sharp contrast to spontaneous collectivism, the real, and radical creativity—attributes deeply valued within contemporary art. This creates a troubling situation in which institutions, or established ways of doing, are seen as limiting the possibility of what art could be, and artworks are perceived as needing to escape the very institutions which define them, in order to be deemed worthy. In this structure, contemporary art follows and validates the logic of neoliberalism and its doctrine of anti-institutionalism, radical creativity, and hyper individualism. This text looks at a short overview of neoliberalism, the economic impact of neoliberalism on artists, and examines the work of artist Renzo Martins in relation to the issues of neoliberalism and institutionalism in art. The accompanying online artwork aims to further the constellation of ideas, forms, and strategies surrounding the issues of the institutional nature of art.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the help, guidance, and dedication of my advisor Patrick Mahon, who was always supportive and enthusiastic no matter what twists came about during our work together. I would like to acknowledge each instructor and peer I encountered during my time at Western—each encounter allowed me grow and learn in profound ways. I would also like to acknowledge the love, support, and belief of my parents, whom none of my academic or artistic endeavours would have been possible without. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my loving and supporting partner who has given me the strength and love to pursue this and all other endeavours. Finally, I would like to acknowledge all the teachers I have encountered in my life who have given so much to me and been generous with their confidence, patience, and love. Thank you all.
# Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................ii

Summary for Lay Audience ...........................................................................................................iii

Acknowledgments ...........................................................................................................................iv

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................v

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................vi

1. « Introduction » .........................................................................................................................1

2. « An Institutional Definition of Art » .....................................................................................4
   2.1. « Contemporary Art Again and Again » .............................................................................8

3. « Neoliberalism & Art » ..........................................................................................................13
   3.1. « Money & Art » .................................................................................................................20

4. « Art Power » ..........................................................................................................................30
   4.1. « Anarcho-Realism Again » ..............................................................................................34

4. « Epilogue » .............................................................................................................................36

Works Cited .....................................................................................................................................46

Curriculum Vitae............................................................................................................................50
List of Figures

Figure 1: *Wealth share of top 1%, selected countries and years*. Source: James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas, and Anthony Shorrocks, *Global Databook 2019*.

Figure 2: *Wealth distribution among global adult population*. Source: James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas, and Anthony Shorrocks, *Global Databook 2019*.

Figure 3: *Changes in Aggregate Turnover* by Dealer Turnover Segment 2018-2019. Source: Clare McAndrew, *2020 Art Market Report*

Figure 4: *Sale Shares of Top Artists in 2019*. Source: Clare McAndrew, *2020 Art Market Report*

Figure 5: *Coexhibition networks*. Source: Samuel P. Fraiberger, et al., *Quantifying Reputation and Success in Art, Science*, vol. 362, no. 6416, 16 Nov. 2018, pp. 825-29

Figure 6: *Prestige Mobility*. Source: Samuel P. Fraiberger, et al., *Quantifying Reputation and Success in Art, Science*, vol. 362, no. 6416, 16 Nov. 2018, pp. 825-29

Figure 7: *Range of Art Practice Annual Income*. Source: Arts Council of England, *Livelihoods of Visual Artists: 2016 Data Report*

Figure 8: *Mean Total Annual Income and Art Income by Sub Art Form*. Source: Arts Council of England, *Livelihoods of Visual Artists: 2016 Data Report*
1. « Introduction »

I have always had an interest in the internet and its various cultures, having spent much of my teenage years running an online photo account dedicated to documenting graffiti in Calgary, Alberta and spending time on message boards, video games, and blogs. I began thinking about this project in the early months of 2019 when I was in the last semester of my BFA at the Alberta University of the Arts (formerly the Alberta College of Art and Design). I had recently felt the trajectory of my artistic practice to have become personally unfulfilling. At the time I had an interest in semiotics, photography, and twentieth century conceptual art and had found a tidy way to incorporate all these things into various found object sculptures. I was receiving high grades and expression of enthusiasm from my professors and the institution, but I felt the work I was making wasn’t aligned with my personal interests or worldview. I was unsure what to do in order to progress or what changes needed to be made. At that point in my BFA I was deeply interested in internet memes—as both entertainment and in relation to my other interests in semiotics and how we look at art.

I proceeded through the remaining final semester of my BFA, making artworks which directly referenced specific internet memes. Many of these works incorporated references that my peers understood but my professors did not, which was a source of friction in some of my critiques. This was a helpful learning experiencing, highlighting the kinds of predetermined knowledge a viewer needs in order to enter a conversation about an artwork and what kinds of knowledge are seen as a ‘given’ when talking about art. I recognized in that context that when I was making works that incorporated art historical or academic references, there was no issue; those works were seen as successful and no one questioned if a viewer would know the references in the work or not. When I began making work that took from popular culture and internet memes, then there was an issue with the legibility of the work and questions around who the work was intended for.
This was a major problem in my mind. I had seen contemporary art as being at the forefront of visual culture, where one could undertake any subject matter, any cultural perspective, and there was the possibility to reach and impact the wider culture. A lot of the positioning of art I encountered in school and books situated it as a site of the most interesting, adventurous, dynamic, and impactful engagement with visual culture. As I spent more time engaging with internet culture and the creative content that is produced on the internet, from an artistic perspective, I began considering the internet’s speed, creativity, its ethos of sharing and remixing, and its far-reaching impact, in comparison to what I observed within contemporary art. What I perceived as the goals of contemporary art I identified in the content being produced on the internet: commentary on real world events, creativity, democratization, its potential for an escape from capital, and, most of all, its reach or impact; all without the frills and apparent condescension of contemporary art. I believe the institutional nature of contemporary art—institutional in the sense of an established way of doing and behaving within its own specific context—has greatly undermined many of the goals and aspirations of contemporary art and artists. At the same time, I recognized that this idea that the institutional nature of contemporary art is holding contemporary art back is a logic rooted in harmful neoliberal attitudes towards institutions and individuals.

These are problems I continue to recognize and contend with, but have no real solution for. Therefore, this piece of writing is not an argument-based thesis, centred around proving or disproving a specific proposition. Rather, this text aims to be a constellation of ideas and examples positioned around some of what I perceive to be issues surrounding contemporary art, and the problems that arise that pertain to larger cultural matters, including as I have observed them via the internet. I do not have answers, but I am interested in discussing, thinking through, and trying, in relation to some of the problems of the institutional nature of contemporary art and the wider distribution of the logic of neoliberalism across all social space, to come to a way of understand contemporary art based on what I identify as real and urgent ideas today. This text is an endeavour to
explore what I see as a closely related network of problems that I have encountered in my art education and time in various art worlds that I cannot ignore.

As acknowledged in the introduction to the overall thesis, this paper takes up institutional definitions of art in order to understand how the institutions surrounding art shape the artworks that are produced. These institutions, both formal and informal, are shaped by history, as well as social and political events. This text takes from the work of Suhail Malik, who posits that these institutions which surround art are deeply influenced by the logic of neoliberalism. Malik explains how this is shaping what art is made and how art is valued, both socially and monetarily. This text closely traces his arguments regarding neoliberalism and art institutions before looking to examples of artworks and surrounding art structures to both further investigate as well as complicate and question Malik’s assertions. Dutch artist Renzo Martins’ various works in the Congo, which speak directly to the structural issues of contemporary art, are taken as the main case study and examined in relation to the framework laid out by Malik in order to highlight potential issues regarding both Malik’s and Martins’ work. Additionally, Francois Cusset’s book How the World Swung to the Right will be examined in order to trace the political history of neoliberalism, conflated ideas of the free spirit and the free market and how these concepts have influenced attitudes towards creativity and art. There is then a discussion of the economic realities of neoliberalism, both broadly and specifically to visual art—this is undertaken in order to examine the material reality of producing art and sustaining oneself and how monetary movements in art shape what art gets made. Finally, as mentioned above, I examine the work of artist Renzo Martins, who speaks to global economic inequality broadly and specifically within contemporary art—this is investigated as a possible solution or strategy to address the institutional problems of art, while simultaneously airing further issues and, at times, undermining and the arguments of Malik.
2. « An Institutional Definition of Art »

George Dickie was an American analytical philosopher with a focus on aesthetics who was writing in the second half of the 20th century. In his work, Dickie sets out to find what, if any, distinguishing characteristics there are for art, by specifying its necessary and sufficient conditions in his book, *Art and the Aesthetic: an Institutional Analysis*. He was writing at a time in the early 1970s when contemporary art was emerging in response to the hegemony of high modernism (Malik 21:20). In his first chapter “What is Art?: An Institutional Analysis” Dickie discusses various philosophical assertions in an attempt to define art, and constructs his own institutional theory of art. Dickie looks to the writing of Morris Weitz, Maurice Mandelbaum, W.E. Kennick, and Arthur Danto in order to review past attempts at defining art and to help construct his own institutional theory. Dickie begins by refuting the then-current arguments around definitions of art and organizes these arguments into three phases—Phase I being the Imitation Theory, an argument that is based on “the readily evident relational property of works of art” (20). Dickie notes that the imitation theory within the fine arts had mainly been adopted by those who do not put much serious thought into theory, and “perhaps cannot be considered as a self-conscious theory of art in the way that the later theories can be” (20). Dickie describes Phase II as the assertion that art cannot be defined, an idea that has its origins in Wittgenstein’s contention that “game” cannot be defined. Dickie wishes to supply Phase III “by avoiding the difficulties of the traditional definitions and to incorporate the insights of the later analysis” (20).

Many art philosophers look to Wittgenstein’s statements around game as a category that has no immediate grounding in reality or hard definition, but can be understood when

---

1 Phase I is described by Dickie as the traditional attempts to define art, namely the imitation theory, which Dickie locates in “the readily evident relational property of works of art, namely art’s relationship to subject matter.” The theory of imitation as a definition of art falls apart with the development of what Dickie calls “nonobjective art”, which demonstrated that “imitation is not even always an accompanying property of the work, much less an essential one.” Another theory that can be categorized in Phase I is the idea that art can be defined as an expression of emotion, which can be debunked by looking to any work of art which is not an expression of emotion (minimalism, dada, etc.). Phase II is defined by Dickie as the contention that art cannot be defined, which Dickie refutes by locating relational properties true to all things considered art.
using the word itself, much like the term “art”. Wittgenstein’s contention that “game” cannot be defined is centred around an argument of there being no single organizing characteristic that is true to all things we call games, arguing that there are loose relationships and similarities that all games share—he relates this situation to the structure of family resemblances (36). In his 1965 essay *Family Resemblances and Generalization concerning the Arts*, Maurice Mandelbaum argued that the contention that both game and art have no sufficient definition is based solely on examining what he calls the “exhibited properties” of these two categories, arguing Wittgenstein only takes into account what is visible in constructing his family resemblance argument (221). Mandelbaum writes that Wittgenstein “failed to make explicit the fact that the literal, root notion of a family resemblance includes this genetic connection no less than it includes the existence of noticeable physiognomic resemblance” (221). This claim can be understood as a failure to take into account what Dickie calls “the non-exhibited, relational aspects of art and game” (23). As Dickie writes, the term, "exhibited properties” can be understood as “easily perceived properties”, like the fact that a “certain area in a painting is red, or that the plot of a tragedy contains a reversal of fortune” (23). Mandelbaum argues that in the examining of relational, non-exhibited properties of game, we can see that all game and art share " the potentiality of...absorbing non-practical interest to either participants or spectator” (221). Dickie takes this line of questioning delineated by Mandelbaum and applies its principals as he searches for the characteristics that constitute what we refer to as “contemporary art”.

Critic and philosopher Arthur Danto focuses attention on these non-exhibited properties of art in his 1964 essay, *The Artworld*, writing, “to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of history of art: an artworld” (558). Danto offers Warhol’s Brillo Boxes as an example of this knowledge being necessary in order to identify something as art, arguing that “the Brillo people cannot manufacture art and…Warhol cannot but make artworks…What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art…” (580). Dickie draws attention to Danto’s idea of an
artworld, and recognizes specific works of art as being particularly embedded in this structure, a structure Dickie names as the institutional nature of art (29).

To move to a more current notion, Boris Groys identifies this institutional nature of art in his book *Art Power*, discussing the work of Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, both working with what Groys calls “simulated readymades”—sculptures which, in the context of an exhibition, appear to be “real” readymades but are actually hand crafted using polyurethane and are visibly indistinguishable from the objects they are mimicking (37). In order to grasp this fact of the work, the viewer must consult the didactic panel in the exhibition space; since touching the work is forbidden, there is no way for the viewer to test this information. This means, as Groys states, “the newly introduced difference between ‘real’ and ‘simulated’ does not represent any already established visual differences between things on the level of their form” (38). These works by Fischli and Weiss rely on the context of the exhibition, on the institution of art, in order to be understood as art, as this difference between “real” and “simulated” can “only be explicitly thematized in the museum as obscure and unrepresentable” (Groys 39).

George Dickie gives a more historical example of this institutional nature of art by citing the history of the tradition of theatre—a tradition that has historically been very mobile, having its roots in the institutions of Greek religion, and then, in medieval times, the church, and “more recently, private business and the state” (30). Dickie is highlighting that “what has remained constant with its own identity throughout its history is the theatre itself as an established way of doing and behaving” (30). The roles of both the actors and theatre-goers are defined by this tradition, and “what the authors, management, and players present is art, and it is art because it is presented within the theatre-world framework,” not because of the content that they are presenting (Dickie 30). The theatre-world framework can be seen as one system within the artworld, with each specific system (i.e., music, visual art, film) being a framework for presenting particular works of art. Just as the written text of the play has a position in the theatre framework, plays also have a place in the literary system—two systems of art which overlap. Each system within the artworld (sculpture, theatre, literature, music, etc.) “furnishes an institutional
Dickie notes that this idea of conferring the status of art onto something within the artworld was made notable by Duchamp through his use of the readymade. However, this idea of conferring the status of art was not created by Duchamp (38). Boris Groys has argued that the aestheticizing of objects—or the conferring the status of art onto an object—first emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution (“Activism”). Where past revolutions would most commonly result in iconoclastic responses, the French Revolution defunctionalized the objects of the old regime—“or, in other words, aestheticized them”—turning them into objects of contemplation (Groys, “Activism”).

Groys argues that this is the first emergence of art as involving the contemplation of objects—art as we regularly understand it today.

In understanding art as the conferring the status onto objects or actions within a certain system, it is evident that there is no limit to potential systems within the generic conception of art, and this provides an “elasticity whereby creativity of even the most radical sort can be accommodated” (Dickie 35). The ability for new sub-systems within the general conception of art to emerge is an important informal function of art and is held dearly within contemporary art, as we know it today. Dickie goes on to stipulate that the artworld could be formalized, but that to those interested in art this would be considered a bad thing, as “such formality would threaten the freshness and exuberance of art” (35). A formalization, or asserting of a formal institution, that decides the systems of art would be seen as limiting the possibilities of art, art being a category which is conferred onto objects within an informal institution.

---

2 See Larry Shiner’s *The Invention of Art* for a more thorough and robust discussion of art in relation to the French Revolution.
2.1. « Contemporary Art Again and Again »

This paradoxical position of avoiding formal institutionalization while depending on an model of informal institutions (or frameworks) to confer the status of art is a position explored further by author and educator Suhail Malik in his 2016 lecture, *Contemporary Art Again and Again: Formal and Informal Institutionalism*, a source very important to this text which will be discussed in detail in order to fully illustrate the mechanics of the anarcho-realist maxim. Malik follows Dickee’s thought in “What is Art?: An Institutional Analysis”, specifically citing Dickee’s assertion surrounding the fear of formal institutionalization of contemporary art potentially leading to a decline in the exuberance and freshness of art. Malik begins his exploration of formal and informal institutionalism within contemporary art by identifying the post-war conception of art as being separate from other social realms and this autonomy being the reason for art’s “ability to be critical of the whole”, or of other social realms, giving it a virtue or morality above other social arenas (arenas which were linked to the horrors of WWII) (Again 00:00:45). This autonomy began to shift as the momentum of post-war capitalism led to art’s instrumentalization for other purposes such as urbanization, fashion, tourism, etc. This instrumentalization eroded art’s perceived autonomy and criticality as it insisted it would no longer be separate from other social realms (Malik, Again 00:01:43). This converging of art and other social systems forced a new understanding of art’s autonomy, an understanding that autonomy affords art the ability to run side by side with its position or function in any given social realm, making it both autonomous and allowing to operate as an actant in that social realm, denying the post-war perception of isolation solely determining autonomy (Malik, Again 00:02:49). Malik then asserts that art, now that it is plugged into other social systems, is no longer concerned with the making of art, per se, (things identifiable as art) as it is with the making of stuff, or things which relate to other things (Again 00:03:15). This new position places art as a system actor, no longer in its own realm with its own concerns separate from the functions of other social realms. But rather, it becomes something that is seen as having the ability to function within other contexts. This position of art as a system actor shifts questions of value in art: it is no
longer important “what the artwork is but rather what it does”, as stuff in the world (Malik, Again 00:03:20). Malik follows this idea by stating that if art is now concerned with doing things, something which is a practical operation, “art cannot be distinguished from other instrumental forms of production”, and therefore, “art’s claims for autonomy fall apart” (Again 00:03:30). This shift is identified as the break from modernism and its aesthetics, as it points to the notion that there are no longer any aesthetic criteria for art (Malik, Again 00:03:55). In regard to the foregoing notions Malik offers, the work of Marina Abramovic comes to mind, specifically her well known endurance performances which emphasise a grounding of the body and a overall mental presence, something that has a practical therapeutic function, as well as an artistic virtue in the contemporary art context it is presented in. It could be argued that the practical, therapeutic, function of the works of Abramovic are what lends further artistic value in the context of contemporary art.

Malik sees this new question of what the artwork is doing and how it relates to other social systems as a desire for “art to be more than art”, or for art to do things that art alone cannot do—it sees social systems failing (including the art system), and looks towards the production of things, or the artwork “doing something” (in other words, the negation of traditional artistic definitions) as a solution (Again 00:10:52-00:12:10). Malik continues by stating that the use of the term “stuff” (in replacement of art) is a stand in for “the things of the real”, or something “without further determination”—an art that can negate formalism (formalism in the sense of following tradition) (Again 00:12:20). He says that the truth of art, or its desire for the real, is actually located outside of itself, happening somewhere else, thus explaining the desire for art to be stuff, not art (Again 00:13:26).“Art’s truth is not art as it currently is... art’s truth is what art does outside of what has been the standard notion of art” and this is identified, as Malik names it, as the anarcho-realist maxim of art (Malik, Again 00:13:43-00:14:03).

This anarcho-realist maxim is described as stipulating “that art is true to itself and art is true to what it should be—is most real—when it is not like art as we predominantly have it, when it is not like what art mostly is in the art world” (Malik, Again 00:14:40). Malik
then says that “the reason for this rejection is that art’s autonomy and exhibition is shaped according to requirements of passive consumption, individualism, and commodification,” all things which are seen as “in a negative relationship to the real” (Malik, Again 00:15:00). This rejection that is at the root of the anarcho-realist maxim is distilled to a rejection of formality in art in order to bring it closer to reality, a rejection of institutionalization in favour of a more “spontaneous collectivism which is also the interest of art” (Malik, Again 00:16:20). Malik clarifies that this anarcho-realist maxim is not a flat out rejection of art, itself but rather “a need to transform art into something else which is better at being what art should be than what art currently is” (Again 00:17:02). This all points to a paradoxical position of contemporary art and the anarcho-realist maxim, with Malik stating that “it recuperates art precisely by rejecting art... it looks to gain what art should be by rejecting what it is” (Again 00:17:41).

In furthering his argument, Malik notes that some institutions are formal, and others are informal, the difference between the two does not lie in what they do but rather how they do it (Again 00:35:45). “Art’s informality, the fact that it's not regulated, is how art’s open texture is not only maintained but also advanced, becoming more and more open” (Malik, Again 00:37:12). The paradoxical position lies in the very fact of art itself being a social convention, or institution, and the limiting nature of institutions on art under the logic of the anarcho-realist maxim.

A relevant example of this is found in critic Nicolas Bourriaud’s 1998 essay, “Relational Form”, where he identified a similar post-war shift in art as what Malik emphasises; however, unlike Malik, Bourriaud does not have the proceeding 15 years of contemporary art to draw from. Bourriaud sees the role of an artwork as “no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” (13). In comparing the language used by Bourriaud in “Relational Form” with the language used by Malik in describing the anarcho-realist maxim, there are notable similarities in their concerns with the real in art, or regarding escaping the limited confines of art. Bourriaud’s identification of the desire to move art from the representational realm of “imaginary utopian realities” towards “models of
action” describes a dominant attitude within much contemporary art of the last 20 years. Most of the artworks produced under the umbrella of relational aesthetics, specifically, value or perpetuate the idea “that art is true to itself and art is true to what it should be—is most real—when it is not like art as we predominantly have it” (Malik, Again 00:14:40). This desire for the real is directly addressed by much of the language surrounding works categorized under relational aesthetics, often positioning the relations of people as more authentic, or real, than what art has previously managed to represent.

Groys names a similar preoccupation with the real in art discussing what he calls the “value boundary between the cultural archive and the profane realm” (New 63). Groys asserts that every culture is hierarchically structured and everything within a culture has a value that is determined by its place in the hierarchy of cultural values—this hierarchy is organized by a structured cultural memory that is solidified in museums, libraries, and other archives—formal institutions (New 64). This structured cultural memory is contrasted with what Groys calls the “profane realm,” that is, everything that exists in culture which is not included into this structured cultural memory, everything which is deemed not important, representative, valuable, or worth keeping by institutions (New 64). Groys identifies that the operation where something is recognized as “new” happens through a deliberate and specific comparison between cultural archive and the profane realm (New 64). Groys elaborates, arguing:

“The source of the new is…the valourizing comparison between cultural values and things in the profane realm…The mechanisms of the new are those governing the relationship between valourized, hierarchically organized cultural memory on the one hand and, on the other, the valueless profane realm.” (New 64).

A clear example of this valourizing comparison between the profane realm and the cultural archive can be seen in the work of American painter Katherine Bernhardt, known for her vivid and crude, large scale paintings of popular culture images. Bernhardt has worked in series which feature Garfield the cat, Coca-Cola, Pink Panther, cigarettes, and fruit and has become a very sought after contemporary painter among collectors, joining
mega gallery David Zwirner in 2021, and having an untitled work from 2016 sell for $233,100 USD at auction (Durón). Much of her commercial success can be attributed to her clever and fun comparisons between images and icons from the profane realm and the valourized hierarchical cultural memory of art history, specifically pop art and 20th century painting that Bernhardt draws from.

Groys is careful to note that this act of taking from the profane realm and proposing a valourizing comparison through an artwork is never able to abolish the value hierarchy itself, it simply allows the cultural archive to absorb that which is from the profane realm. This comparison of something in the profane realm with something in the cultural archive is often undertaken with the goal of critiquing the value hierarchy – which created this situation to begin with. Groys posits that if this critique stays at the general, vague level, it is not very effective as it would always be correct in a trivial way, stating that “no hierarchy can be theoretically legitimized, if legitimation is taken to mean, as it usually is, reference to the reality underpinning the cultural hierarchy…” (New 65).

Malik’s idea of the anarcho-realist maxim identifies this same mechanism of the new that Groys identifies. The cultural archive that Groys names, or the hierarchical cultural memory, can be understood as the informal institutionalism that takes place within the artworld; the already established ways of doing and behaving in the artworld. The profane realm can be compared to the anarcho-realist maxim because, as Groys notes, those in the artworld are searching for a legitimizing reasoning behind the hierarchy, a way to understand the hierarchy through reality or “the real”. That which is in the profane realm, or which exists informally in the world, is absorbed into the structured cultural memory, the same operation discussed by Malik, where a new artwork breaks the informal conventions of contemporary art in order to reach something “realer” than that which already exists within art.
3. « Neoliberalism & Art »

Towards the conclusion of Malik’s talk, the critic discusses how the rejection of formality (formality in the sense of following tradition or form) within the anarcho-realist maxim is a core value of contemporary art. Under the guise of the anarcho-realist maxim, formal institutions (i.e., what art is supposed to be or what art has been) are seen as slowing down and limiting the possibilities of art. Any limiting or formal institutionalization of art would limit what the actual art work could be, and within the anarcho-realist maxim, art must go outside of what art is to truly live up to art. Malik arrives at this concluding point in his talk by identifying that “in this structure, contemporary art follows and validates the logic of neoliberalism” (Again 01:06:15). Malik goes on to argue that “in neoliberalism, formal institutionalization and the protections it can offer are undone at every level, from the state, to labour conditions, to cultural institutions, to play, to subjecthood. Neoliberalism is against regulations, it’s against statutes—it’s for enforcement by the construction of a power elite without regulation” (Again 01:06:35).

This rejection of formality in order to achieve a real or truthful art that is at the core of the anarcho-realist maxim is the same sentiment which fuels silicon valley with what many would recognise as the sector-disrupting capitalist mindset. Malik states that in neoliberalism “formal institutions are undone in the name of... adaptability, transformation, and radical creativity. You can think here of the disruption paradigm, which is part of the standard discourses of the startup, or the entrepreneur” (Again 01:07:00). This radical creativity, which gives social capital to entrepreneur’s endeavours in capitalist sectors, is the same value which gives artistic capital to artist in the art world. Art gains value in the anarcho-realist maxim through the rejection of past iterations of itself in order for something more creative (regardless of content) to emerge—Malik draws a parallel here to neoliberalism’s tendencies to produce more “precarious forms of labour, which are more creative” (Again 01:07:27). Examples of this increase in precarious labour can be seen in the rise of Uber and various Uber-like business models in which a company creates a brand umbrella and hires freelance workers to loosely work
under this umbrella brand; all under the guise of the freedom to the worker while lowering wages and denying benefits. Facebook also operates according to a similar model in its content moderation, hiring freelance workers who make cents per traumatic post they moderate, while Facebook avoids providing mental health support or any other costly benefit to these freelance workers.

Italian artist duo Eva and Franco Mattes have dealt with this dark reality for content moderators in their ongoing work *Dark Content*, a series of video works hosted on the dark web and only accessible using the Tor Browser. Dark Content features personal stories of real life content moderators played through a text to speech program and accompanied by a generic avatar voicing the text to speech. The videos created by the duo are displayed on monitors attached to the bottom of overturned office tables with headphones next to each monitor, encouraging the viewer sit on the floor in order to listen to these stories of content moderators. The content moderators tell disturbing stories of their struggles to moderate violent, abusive, and illegal content and the mental trauma they have dealt with as a result. Other moderators talk of being forced to remove content that would otherwise be acceptable for what they perceived as political motivation from the higher ups. These crudely rendered videos tell dark and disturbing stories about content moderators and point to the larger role of companies that operate online platforms amidst the complexity of our societal fabric.4

To be specific about neoliberalism and its material terms, it can be thought of as involving capital concentration by the dominant owners of capital, a reduction of state control (deregulation), the financialization of accumulation (investment, rentierism), autonomisation of social formations to rational markets, and the superimposition of the entrepreneurial mindset on all social life (Malik, Neolib 16:37). Malik sees contemporary art’s adoption of these neoliberal values as preceding “the distribution of this logic across the whole of social space” (Again 01:08:45).

4 Another artwork that utilises the Tor Browser and gallery space is Trevor Paglen and Jacob Appelbaum’s *Autonomy Cube*. 
Artist Jeremy Bailey identifies this development in his irony fuelled 2014 video work *Nail Art Museum*. The video is filmed in the style of a personal vlog, common but not limited to YouTube, and features Bailey performing as an “anonymous famous new media artist”, giving a description of a new program he’s coded allowing miniature plinths to be imposed over ones fingers and feature artworks using augmented reality technology. Throughout the video, Bailey is emphasizing the internet as a way to get famous, but cites concerns over privacy, so he turns to “the hand” as a solution, citing the history of “the artist’s hand” as a topic. Bailey says the artist’s hand has disappeared, as new media artist don’t make things, they simply “aggregate the work of others, they’re like curators, they’re like mini institutions—they bring the best stuff other people have worked hard to make together in one place, and then take credit for it...It’s a great system that helps people get famous a lot quicker” (Bailey 2:03). Bailey suggests that he will make the artist’s hand the institution through his nail art museum, (he calls it a “hand-stitution”), placing plinths on the fingernails and allowing the different artworks from history to be placed on these plinths. Bailey says “The institution is now me!” Bailey ends the video with Beyonce’s “All The Single Ladies” playing while the plinths augmented onto his fingers dance with he music—Bailey states “Look at me! I’m expressing my self as an institution! It’s better than real life! My hand is famous!”. Bailey ironically buys into the artist as a brand, the artist as an institution, a new informal one that is better than the Tate or the Whitney because it is rooted in a subjective, liberal person, who strives to become famous from their art.

In a different but not unrelated approach the art and fashion collective Bernadette Corporation held an exhibition titled *The Complete Poem* at Greene Naftali gallery in New York. The exhibition consisted of 38 photographs by fashion photographer David Vasiljevic commissioned by Bernadette Corporation and a roughly 130 page poem titled “A Billion and Change”, written collectively by Bernadette Corporation. The photographs of Vasiljevic present themselves as traditional fashion photography that one would expect to encounter in a mall, magazine, or advertisement; young, attractive, cool looking people gazing into the camera but the logos and branding expected from these images are
completely absent. A year prior to the exhibition Vasiljevic had shot a Levi’s jean campaign that members of Bernadette Corporation had seen and identified as a desirable aesthetic for their exhibition. Founding member of Bernadette Corporation Bernadette Van-Huy describes denim campaigns by fashion brands as having a blankness and expansive aura which functions on subtexts—a bag of tricks that, as Chris Kraus identifies in her book, Where Art Belongs, as being very good at conflating youth with “lifestyle” (46). At the exhibition opening of The Complete Poem, collective member Antek Walczak remarked, “What is everyone’s problem with fashion? There’s a blind spot—people think fashion is uniquely superficial, as if everything else is not” (Kraus 45).

Accompanying these 38 photographs is an epic poem written by 5-8 members of the collective over a summer; the subject matter of the poem is expansive, touching on the everyday and aiming to understand what Kraus calls a “world situation” (50). The epic poem format is open, able to take in any subject matter or happening as the poem takes place across time. Collective member Jim Fletcher recounts looking to Gertrude Stein’s Stanzas in Meditation as inspiration, a long poem that has its own logic of language but no single subject matter or event, stating, “It doesn’t have to take place in a single day or recount a single event, but in a way, there is an event, and that’s the event of the poem and that time” (Kraus 52). Roberta Smith describes the poem as entertaining and vivid, filled with references to current events and childhood stories—“little of it sticks, but the totality is extremely polished” (Smith).

The poem is displayed in 13 vitrines, spanning nearly the entirety of the gallery, requiring the viewer to constrain themselves and dedicate a fair amount of time to experience the poem. Bernadette Corporation made a deliberate decision to not distribute the poem as a typical written work tied to a visual art exhibition, there were no press copies, no online website, no physical take-aways at the gallery. Bernadette Corporation insisted their poem be treated as an artwork and, as Kraus describes, this was deeply disturbing to most viewers (54). Kraus recounts the terror and confusion of viewers encountering the poem, recounting conversations with colleagues at the exhibition opening: “Is it a… real poem? Is it sincere? Or is it parody? Is it—umm, any good?” (49). The relationship between art
and writing has historically been quite precarious, often used as a means to give art language that can be translated into value (Kraus 54). Kraus posits that one of the only paid non teaching jobs for poets and non-mainstream writers left is art reviews and catalogue essays for museum and galleries, comparing this situation to the role of fiction magazines for mid-20th century writers, offering a badly paid livelihood (54). John Kelsey, one of the members of Bernadette Corporation at the time, recounts discussions he had with artists and writers around the decision to treat the epic poem as an artwork, saying “some of our most politically correct friends were outraged that we weren’t passing the poem out for free or putting it online. And artists friends basically say, ‘art should be for sale, writing should be for free’” (Kraus 54). Bernadette Corporation and Greene Naftali sold the poem by the vitrine, offering collectors the ability to own sections of the manuscripts.

Kraus discusses *A Billion and Change* in the relation to Bernadette Corporation’s past work, identifying what she calls an “off-kilter blankness” running throughout the projects (45). At the turn of the century, Bernadette Corporation published a fashion magazine titled *Made in USA* that featured “zombie models in mirrored glasses posed is disarrayed rooms”, as Kraus describes it (45). On Bernadette Corporation’s website, they discuss the ethos behind the magazine, stating, “We wanted to change the world because we didn't like the way it was. Now, we are more mellow and interested in turning our backs on the world, exploring new, wild spaces and telling the world what we found, how great it is, how you can do anything out there… ‘It's a very American mentality”. They go on to state, “We have always liked fashion for what it is—a seductive surface” (Bernadette Corporation). This seductive surface is what *The Complete Poem* presents to the viewer in an uncomfortably unashamed and earnest way. In discussing the 38 photographs that appear in *The Complete Poem*, Kraus describes the change in the perception of fashion photography when removing the branding of the images, stating, “Six individuals present themselves in a series of poses and what do we see? Sex, class, and race; race, class, and sex…Like all models in ad campaigns, the product is really themselves—and by extension, a life in jeans” (47).
The Bernadette Corporation’s very specific use of fashion industry aesthetics in a seemingly uncritical or unashamed tone, accompanied by a long uncompromising and earnest poem, made for a very uncomfortable viewing experience for the late 00s Chelsea art audience. *The Complete Poem* is an epic work as an art exhibition: it is concerned with creating an event, a world, turning its back on the community it is presenting to and showing a possibility that is has been constructed—using the aesthetic language of seductive lifestyle branding. *The Complete Poem* is fascinating in not only the world it constructs and presents to the viewer, but in its self aware posturing and play with the taboo but ever present attitudes and tendencies in the artworld.

In light of the artworks discussed, it’s important to think about the somewhat insidious ways political attitudes develop. In his 2018 book *How the World Swung to the Right*, Francois Cusset discusses the shift in political climates from “the end of the 1970s to our contemporary moment of political radicalization and social resurgence” (23). Cusset sees the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s as forming distinct political eras, and discusses what shaped these eras in the sense of political and social history. He outlines the rise of neoliberalism throughout this time period, citing a sweep of neoconservatism in the 1980s starting in the west that led to the rest of the world, and then how a specific push happened as a result of the “doctrinal euphoria, just after the fall of “real” communism, with the toppling of the Berlin wall and the dismantling of the Soviet Union” (23). This feeling of post-communist euphoria was in harmony with the systemic “capitalist deregulation and finical globalization” which was implemented in the 1990s—the mantra of “no democracy without a free market” created a foundation for the more sporadic and incoherent neoliberalism of the 2000s (Cusset 24). Twenty-first century neoliberalism no longer exists on a doctrinal basis but rather “projects itself against the ideologies of previous decades” to look for validation. Cusset writes that this iteration of neoliberalism “freed consumerist and creative energies, but didn’t necessarily liberate societies or political systems” (25).

Franco “Bifo” Berardi further nuances the evolution of neoliberalism in a poetic and pointed manner, regarding 1977 as the year neoliberalism truly emerged, with the death
of Charley Chaplin, signalling “the end of the possibility of a gentle modernity”, and with Wozniak and Jobs registering the Apple trademark marking the start of user friendly computer interfaces and the coming infosphere (93).

“Don’t think about your future. You don’t have one. What Sid Vicious and the other Sex Pistols screamed and declared in 1977 was the final premonition of the end of modern times, the end of industrial capitalism, and the beginning of a new age, which is an age of total violence: financial globalization, deregulation, total competition, infinite war” (Berardi 94).

From the late 1970s onward, an ideological mix of libertarian and free market values emerged, recycling the countercultural and emancipatory discourses of the previous era in service of business and management, producing an informal iteration of capitalism that valued nomadism, creativity, and fluidity (Cusset 29). Cusset notes the attitudes surrounding liberalism and libertarianism in the 1970s and 1980s, with the former being used to describe general permissiveness and (in other languages) an unbridled form of capitalism, whereas the latter, at this time, referred to forms of anticonformism on the left as well as the right, resulting in an alliance “between the emancipatory themes of the 1960s and the strategic acceleration of the market economy and the privatization of all existence” (Cusset 30). As the Baby Boomer generation came into early adulthood, it would increasingly associate the forces of capital with the depoliticized legacy of the 1960s revolts” (Cusset 30). Cusset elaborates:

“Soon after May 1968, advertisements for French supermarkets showed silhouettes of riot police taken from protest posters but who were they now bludgeoning...prices! This convergence of interest between a free spirit and a free market included an element of economic necessity…” (31).

Thatcher’s election in 1979 and her subsequent battle with British mining and labour unions cemented the idea that there is no alternative to a “market economy freed of its state safegaurds” (Cusset 38). As the emancipatory, anti conformist, and creative ethos of
the 1960s became tied to the free market and democracy-capitalism, western countries began exporting this emerging neoliberalism to the east throughout the 1980s.

3.1. « Money & Art »

This history of neoliberalism propelling the ideas of the free spirit and “radical creativity” informs much of the landscape of today’s contemporary art networks. As Malik states, the logic of neoliberalism is being dispersed across all of social space, and as Cussets traces, the social attitudes of neoliberalism are rooted in values of the 1960s, the western governments of the 1980s, and economic enthusiasm of the baby boomer generation—but what I have not yet addressed is the financial outcomes of neoliberalism.

Throughout each of the decades cited, the accumulation and concentration of wealth among a smaller and smaller group of people has occurred. While there have indeed been notable protest movements which have sadly not produced much impact—Occupy Wall Street, the 1999 Seattle WTO protests, and the anti-austerity protests in Greece being exemplary. A chart published by James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas and Anthony Shorrocks in the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report (see fig.1) lays out the percentage of wealth

![Figure 1: Wealth share of top 1%, selected countries and years. Source: James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas, and Anthony Shorrocks, Global Databook 2019.](image-url)
owned by the top 1% of various nations and shows how this has shifted from 2000-2019, with the majority of the world’s richest people actually gaining money after the economic catastrophe of 2008 that left many around the world with nothing in the way of economic resources, and many more still trying to get back to where they were pre-crash (Shorrock et al. 13).

Looking to another graph by James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas and Anthony Shorrock in the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report (see fig. 2) that examines how wealth is distributed across all of the world, it’s evident that just 0.9% of the population owns 43.9% of all the wealth in the world, while the bottom 56.6% of the world owns just 1.8% of the world’s wealth (Shorrock et al. 12). On its face, this graph represents the massive inequality that exists under capitalism broadly, but which has been consolidated and made worse under the influence of neoliberalism. In the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report it is noted that those with wealth in the range USD 10,000–100,000 have seen the biggest growth this century, growing from 514 million in 2000 to 1.7 billion in mid-2019. The report notes that “this reflects the growing prosperity of emerging economies, especially China, and the expansion of the middle class in the developing world” (Shorrock et al. 9). Though this would seem like positive development, “the average wealth of this group is USD 33,530, a little less than half the level of average wealth worldwide, but considerably above the average wealth of the countries in which most of the members reside” (Shorrock et al. 9).
Here I want to turn the discussion to the specific question as to what this economic reality of neoliberalism mean for artists. Are the patterns of financial movement and their attendant effects the same in the art market as in other market contexts? According to Art Basil and UBS’s 2020 Art Market Report prepared by Clare McAndrew, global sales of art and antiques was at an estimated $64.1 billion in 2019, with 40.5 million transactions making up that number (2020 28). Of that 64.1 billion, 36.8 billion is made of gallery and dealer sales, with 84% of individual transactions in the dealer sector resulting from prices below $50,000, but “these represented a smaller share of the value of sales at 27% in 2019, down 10% from 2018, with more value shifting to the higher end,” a trend consistent with the rest of monetary movements in the same period (McAndrew, 2020 54). Looking at the information in the graph compiled by McAndrews (see fig. 3), it is clear that the “the poorest performing segments of the market for the last three years have been those dealers at the lower end, particularly dealers with (a turnover of) less than $500,000 per annum.” This lower end of the market notably accounts for emerging and some mid-career artists (2020 57). Looking at the share of total sales by price bracket in 2019, a similar fact of the chart in fig. 3 can be seen in a different context in fig 4.

Another important aspect of the dealer market that requires examining is how much each artist’s sales make up, within the roster of a given dealer’s total sales. According the 2020 Art Market Report, 57% of the total sales of galleries working solely in the primary market came from their top three artists, with 43% coming from just one artist (see fig 3) (McAndrew, 2020 102). The concentration of sales around the top 3 artists was greater
for galleries with lower turnovers, meaning that even within the lower end of the market, similar financial polarization is happening, accumulating wealth in the higher-end areas of the lower market (McAndrew, 2020 102). Galleries with sales lower than $1 million relied on their top 3 artists to generate 63% of sales while galleries with turnover greater than 1 million received 56% of their sales from their top 3 artists (McAndrew, 2020 102). As a final note on this top down pyramid structure of gallery rosters, in 2019 the top 2% of artists accounted for 22% of the content of gallery exhibitions worldwide, while 84% of artists were represented in less than half of all shows (McAndrew, 2020 100).

In the 2018 Art Market Report by Art Basel and UBS, Dr. McAndrews wrote “The analysis of sales in both the dealer and auction sectors in 2017 provided empirical evidence of this polarization, confirming the top-heavy nature of the trade, with the ultra-high end dominating values despite the fact that most of the transactions and the majority of artists whose works come on to the market are at the middle and lower end” (McAndrew, 2018 334). This quote, and the analysis of the dealer sector in 2017, and the numbers laid out in the 2020 report show the configuration of wealth in the art market are no different than in the broader economy.5

---

5 This is of very little surprise considering the open secret of contemporary art being used as a tax evasion and money laundering method by the ultra-wealthy. See Hito Steyerl’s Duty Free Art for more on this.
A 2018 study conducted by Samuel P. Fraiberger, Roberta Sinatra, Magnus Resch, Christoph Riedl, and Albert-László Barabási for the periodical Science aimed to quantify reputation and success within contemporary art. The study reconstructs the exhibition history of nearly half a million artists, “mapping out the coexhibition network that captures the movement of art between institutions”—examining the central nodes of this network to reveal institutional prestige, and show the career trajectory of individual artists regarding their access to coveted institutions (Fraiberger et al. 826). The chart below (see fig 5) was produced by this study in order to demonstrate the coexhibition

Figure 5: Coexhibition networks. Source: Samuel P. Fraiberger, et al., *Quantifying Reputation and Success in Art*, *Science*, vol. 362, no. 6416, 16 Nov. 2018, pp. 825-29
network. Each node is an institution, and the size of each node is proportional to each institution’s eigenvector centrality (measure of influence). The nodes are connected if they both exhibited the same artist, with the weight of each link being equal to the number of artists’ coexhibitions. The links are the same colour as the end nodes, or gray when the end nodes are multiple colours.

The graph in figure 5 makes evident the highly centralized core of the artworld, with the authors noting that “movement between the hubs in the core was exceptionally high: The link weight between Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Guggenheim was 33 times higher than expected if artists would move randomly between institutions” (Fraiberger et al. 826). The study notes that geographical distance to one of the 10 main hubs, in general, shows little to no relationship with prestige, “while the network-based distance of an institution to one of the top 10 institutions was closely linked to its prestige…thus, network effects play a defining role in influencing the evolution of an artist’s reputation and valuation” (Fraiberger et al. 825).

The study also looks to prestige mobility, the ability for an artist to move up in the prestige/institution network—it assessed this by grouping artists based on the average prestige of artists’ first exhibitions (Fraiberger et al.). Artists would receive a high reputation if they exhibited in the top 20% (see fig. 6) of institutions based on the prestige network ranking, and artists would receive a low reputation if they exhibited, on average, in the bottom 40% of institutions (Fraiberger et al. 827). The authors note that of the artists exhibiting in the top 20%, 39% of them continued exhibiting 10 years after their initial exhibition whereas, of artists in the bottom 40%, only 14% continued exhibiting 10 years later (Fraiberger et al. 827). Of the 4058
high-initial reputation artists that the study examined, 58.6% remained in high-prestige institutions until the end of their careers, with the authors highlighting that “only 0.2% had the average prestige of their five most recent exhibits in the bottom 40%” (Fraiberger et al. 827). The authors of the study call this a “lock in effect”. Suhail Malik calls it “artistic social/economic immobility”—where artists with high-prestige exhibitions are likely guaranteed to continue exhibiting in the higher prestige area of the network, something not afforded to the artists in low-prestige institutions, noting that “only 10.2% of low-initial reputation artists had the average prestige of their five most recent exhibits in the top 20%” (Malik, Neolib 52:26). The conclusion the authors come to in this regard is that the first 5 exhibitions of an artists “predicted success across a variety of measures”. Specifically, these include the number of exhibitions an artists has, whether or not those exhibitions are in an artists’ home country or not, how often an artwork is traded, and how much an artwork is sold for; they call this situation a “strong path dependance” (Fraiberger et al. 825).

This foregoing reflects a highly concentrated, centralized, selective centre of the artworld that goes beyond strictly effecting where certain artists show, with the authors writing that they observed “a high correlation between network-based ranks and economic value of the exhibited artists artworks” (Fraiberger et al. 825).

In 2018 the Arts Council of England published a report titled Livelihoods of Visual Artists: 2016 Data Report which looks at the economic livelihood of artists in relation to types of artistic practice, funding, working other jobs, age, disability, and more. The survey received over 2000 responses as the largest survey of artists ever conducted in England. This report is helpful in examining the economic realities of artists outside of gallery-dealer circuits discussed in the Art Basil and UBS’s 2020 Art Market Report. According to the Livelihoods of Visual Artists: 2016 Data Report, the majority of artists (35%) working in Britain make between £0 and £1,000 (roughly $1415 USD) annually from their artistic practices (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al.17). This is not to be

---

6 For a specifically Canadian example of the economic status of artists see The Art Gallery of York University’s Waging Culture survey.
confused with total income for artists, which factors in other jobs that artists undertake in order to maintain a living—the median total income of artists in Britain is roughly £12,000, or just under $17,000 USD (in 2021 the minimum income standard in the UK was calculated at £19,200 a year according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation) (Malik, Neolib 1:04:15). 64% of artists make less than £5,000 from their artistic practices while 11% of artists are making more than £15,000, with only 3% making over £35,000 (see fig.7)—this demonstrates a very similar wealth concentration as discussed earlier, with a general wealth consolidation happening for a very small few while those in the lower half are left with less.

![Figure 7: Range of Art Practice Annual Income. Source: Arts Council of England, Livelihoods of Visual Artists: 2016 Data Report](image)

The report examines other factors in relation to income, such as age, level of education, stage of career, gender, disability, and parents’ level of education. The report found that, on average, artists in the 19-29 age range earn slightly over £2,000 annually from their artistic practices while artists age 30-39 earn over £5,500, and artists age 40-49 earn over £7,500 (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al. 21). Regarding level of education, the report found that artists without a degree earn on average slightly over £13,000 pounds in
total income (not solely from there artistic practice), while artists with a bachelor degree earned slightly less than £15,000 annually, and artists with a post-graduate degree earn roughly £17,500 (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al. 5). Regarding education level, the study makes a point that generally those with a higher level of education earn more, so this income disparity may be explained outside of artistic contexts (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al. 15). The report found that “the average total income of artists increases across career stages”, with emerging artists earning roughly £14,000 in total income annually, while mid career artists earn approximately £18,000, and established artists earning just over £20,000 on average (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al. 16). The report identified that women who are artists earn roughly £5,000 per year less than men, with total income averaging around £14,800 for women and £19,800 for men (the report did not have any information regarding artists that identify as non-binary) (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al. 14). Artists with disabilities have a significantly lower mean average total income than non-disabled artists, with disabled artists earning just over £11,000 and non-disabled artists earning over £16,000 (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al. 15). Artists with at minimum one parent having attended post secondary earn on average roughly £17,000 in total annual income, while artists with neither parents

Table 1: Mean total annual income and art income by sub artform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub Artform</th>
<th>Mean total income</th>
<th>Mean artform income</th>
<th>Artform income as % of total income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participatory/community/socially engaged</td>
<td>£20,270</td>
<td>£8,260</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print/printmaking</td>
<td>£19,820</td>
<td>£4,590</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>£18,200</td>
<td>£5,900</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other visual art</td>
<td>£16,790</td>
<td>£7,420</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving image</td>
<td>£16,730</td>
<td>£2,820</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft(s)</td>
<td>£16,300</td>
<td>£8,120</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>£16,190</td>
<td>£6,910</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramic(s)</td>
<td>£16,150</td>
<td>£6,860</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>£15,210</td>
<td>£5,330</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing/illustration</td>
<td>£14,970</td>
<td>£7,120</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine art(s)</td>
<td>£14,910</td>
<td>£5,100</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance art</td>
<td>£13,910</td>
<td>£4,800</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile(s)</td>
<td>£13,180</td>
<td>£3,920</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-discipline</td>
<td>£11,860</td>
<td>£3,340</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>£16,160</td>
<td>£6,020</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates that a sub artform had an insufficiently large sample for the findings to be tested for statistical significance. Results for these artforms are therefore provided as indicative only.

**Figure 8:** Mean Total Annual Income and Art Income by Sub Art Form.

having attended post-secondary earn roughly £15,500 (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team et al. 16).

Table 1 from the *Livelihoods of Visual Artists: 2016 Data Report* looks at the total annual income as well as income directly from artistic practices based on the specific medium or artform. The findings in this table demonstrate a clear financial advantage towards artists practicing participatory, community focused, or socially engaged art, with this type of artistic practice generating nearly double the income than the next financially leading artistic practice—printmaking. Seeing participatory art at the top of this list may seem surprising, however as Suhail Malik mentions, this can be attributed to the willingness of art institutions to fund these types of practices, whereas an artist working with textiles has not only a high cost of production, but also has to do the work of finding a dealer or an audience willing to spend money on their artworks (Neolib 1:10:54). The Livelihoods of Visual Artists: 2016 Data Report demonstrates the economic realities of artists outside of the strictly dealer/gallery market and looks to the financial positions of artists themselves. The report demonstrates the wealth polarization happening within artistic economies materially effects artists. Suhail Malik names the current finical landscape of working artists as “artist poverty” and argues that the current economic paradigm is quite bleak (Neolib 1:13:53).
4. « Art Power »

In 2008, Dutch artist Renzo Martens released a documentary film titled *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*—the film follows Martens as he travels through western Congo investigating the state of poverty in that country. The film—which is shot by Martens and follows him as a sort of protagonist behind the camera—shows Martens interacting with plantation workers, plantation owners, photo journalists, doctors, local militias, and gold mine operators, all while carrying a large neon sign that reads “ENJOY POVERTY” throughout his journey. In the film, Martens establishes that poverty is the Congo’s biggest resource, bringing in more money in aid annually than what is generated by industries like copper or diamonds in the region. In his essay *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty from a Postcolonial Perspective*, Matthias De Groof describes this positioning of poverty as a “radically capitalistic viewpoint”—Martens seemingly extrapolates the logic of capitalism and commodification to an absurd end point, which the artist also sees as a solution (145). As De Groof puts it, “if Western economies, philanthropy, journalism, and aid profit from poverty, why shouldn’t those who suffer it: Congo’s inhabitants?” (146).

Throughout the film, Martens’ goal is to establish a sort of emancipation program which aims at teaching those living in poverty in the Congo how to benefit from their poverty. In the film, Martens interacts with photojournalists from Europe visiting the Congo to take photographs of malnutrition, the aftermath of war or violence, the state of the sick in hospitals etc. Martens asks one of these journalist if he shares any of the $50 USD he earns per photograph with the subject of his images, and the journalists responds that he doesn’t, arguing that he is the author of the photograph, the one who condenses from the world into an image and therefore is deserving of the entirety of the money.

Martens proceeds to meet with local photographers who make roughly 1USD a day photographing local weddings and other such events and tells them that they could be making $50 USD per image if they begin photographing the products of poverty instead. There are a few disturbing scenes that follow where Martens brings these local
photographers to families of malnourished children and instructs the photographers on how to photograph them. He then brings these local photographers to meet with a representative from Doctors Without Borders to ask permission to photograph those suffering in their hospitals. The representative is shocked at what he deems as the exploitative and immoral request of the Congolese photographers and turns them away, while simultaneously allowing Western photo journalists access to photograph their hospitals. De Groof contextualizes this interaction within the larger colonial position of the Congo, stating that “the Congolese person who wants to photograph his or her own poverty is obstructed by Western institutions that regulate the media in the same way as gold and coltan. He or she is still an object in an image” (146).

In the years immediately after making the film, Martens founded the Institute for Human Activities (IHA), a research project that states its goal as being to “prove that artistic critique on economic inequality can bypass it not symbolically, but in material terms” (Institute for Human Activities). Martens describes what he names as critical interventionist art—art that deals with income inequality, legacies of colonialism, precarious labour etc.—staging itself in economically disadvantaged places where it has a symbolic value, but little to no material impact (Martens 0:10:25). The places of reception of this critical interventionist art, where it is shown, distributed, written about, sold, etc. are where a very real material economic impact is felt (Martens 0:10:50). Martens sees this as representing a division between labour and profit within art, a division that is no different than any other globalized industry. The Congo is home to some of the largest deposits of natural resources in the world with an estimated 24 trillion USD in resources, yet it is considered one of the poorest countries on the planet with the 5th lowest GDP in the world ("Congo with"). Canadian palm oil producer Feronia, who took over many of the Unilever palm oil plantations in the Congo in 2009, has been accused of paying its Congolese plantation workers below minimum wage and providing abysmal housing while earning roughly 28.3 million annually and owning over 100,000 hectares of land in the Congo (Arsenault). Feronia is also majority-owned by the British government through foreign aid funding (Arsenault).
Art’s ability to accumulate capital where it is shown usually leads to gentrification in the areas of the typically Western cities that house art circuits. Biennials and art centres are not funded by local governments and the wealthy because of their ability to uproot dominant political thought or generate economic equality. Rather, their support is due to art circuits’ abilities to attract tourism and wealthy taxpayers, to create a desirable investment climate, and raise the economic profile of the city (Martnes 11:40). This idea of cities prioritizing things like art circuits in order to attract investment and economic growth was popularized by Richard Florida’s 2002 book *The Rise of The Creative Class*, where he argues regional economic advantages have little to do with raw resources in the present day and are now much more rooted in a city’s ability to attract who Florida calls “creatives”. European property group Atenor has described the need for cities to join “the cultural arms race” (Debersaques 1). Florida and his ideas are generally seen negatively by artists and art communities, as his ideas instrumentalize artists and art circuits via the gentrification of cities.

Martens and the IHA wish to focus this gentrification in parts of the world that don’t traditionally benefit from an accumulation of wealth by bringing the traditional art circuits to these places; a sort of reverse gentrification. In 2011, the IHA began building an art centre in the Congo that would offer studio art classes and various seminars. The centre was built in an abandoned Unilever shop and located very close to a palm oil plantation that was established in 1911 by Unilever, and sold to Feronia in 2009. In 2012 the IHA had an opening seminar at this newly built art centre that was part of the 7th Berlin Biennial. As described on the IHA’s website, “Congolese and international speakers gathered at the plantation to discuss the history of the plantation, gentrification, and the possibilities for art to deal meaningfully with the conditions of its own existence…” (Institute for Human Activities). The opening seminar featured a panel on institutional critique with Marcus Steinweg, Nina Möntmann, and T.J. Demos, as well as a keynote lecture delivered by Richard Florida where he discussed his idea of the creative class and how this idea can be applied in the Congo.
In 2013, Feronia destroyed the IHA’s settlement, confiscated artwork, and blocked roads leading to the art centre. Following this, Martens and the IHA moved the settlement to a different abandoned Unilever plantation in an undisclosed area of the Congo so as to avoid this happening again.

In their new location they began building the Lusanga International Research Center for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI). The IHA in collaboration with the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC or Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, in English), began creating sculptures out of clay, mud, dirt. These sculptures, many of them made by cacao plantation workers, were then three dimensionally scanned in the Congo and 3D printed in chocolate for exhibition in western art circuits. In early 2017, the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League had their inaugural exhibition at SculptureCentre in New York. The profits made from the exhibition and sale of these artworks in the Western art market were put back into the Congo, in what the IHA and the CATPC named “post-plantations”—egalitarian plantations funded by art and owned by the workers, while being run in an ecologically sustainable way. As of 2019, CATPC has bought back 62 hectares of land from Unilever and Feronia. As Martens usefully points out regarding the economic success of the project, fair trade results in a markup of 20% on the price of chocolate, while art is able to make a markup of 7000%.

In 2015, before the exhibition of the chocolate sculptures with CATPC, Martens delivered a lecture at the Walker Art Centre regarding his work in the Congo. In this lecture, Marten’s discusses this work in the context of morality and the political claims of art. In the lecture, Martens began by identifying the ethical wishes of contemporary art in aiding the fight against global inequality by bringing attention to it through artworks (Martens 00:09:31). Martens calls these things “critical gestures that for better or for worse try to denounce capitalist exploitation” but which he sees as not actually bettering labour conditions anywhere other than the cities which show the actual artworks (Martens 00:010:35). Martens compares these critical gestures to baroque trompe-l'œil paintings, saying that they offer you an image but they do not explain the structural and economic conditions that are needed to construct the artwork (Martens 00:10:46). He states that
“more often than not, the political claims of contemporary art are very very limited”
(Martens 00:11:34) Marten’s brings up the 2002 work by Francis Alýs *When Faith Moves
Mountains*, a work in which the artist invited 500 volunteers to the outskirts of Lima,
Peru to shovel a sand dune, moving it a few inches; the artwork was filmed and lives as
documentation. This work was extremely commercially successful, having been shown
by the artists gallery David Zwirner in New York and then entering the collection of the
Walker Art Centre, MOMA, as well as being the inaugural blockbuster exhibition of the
Brussels’ new contemporary art centre, Wiels.

Wiels was established in the Forest neighbourhood of Brussels in 2007, an area
characterized, at the time, by its industrial buildings and socioeconomic insecurity
(Debersaques 1). Initially, the city of Brussels wished to transform the area into a new
residential area, but through consultation with private stakeholders and the Forest
municipality, decided to construct a cultural sector instead (Debersaques 10). Real estate
development firm JCX ended up purchasing close to 60% of the available property in the
neighbourhood, but not until investing a large amount into Wiels (Debersaques 10). As
Martens put its, “the establishment of this art centre was used as a lubricant for a far
larger and quit gigantic real estate deal—and, within the first blockbuster exhibition, the
one which had to justify the presence of that art centre, this *When Faith Moves
Mountains*] was the centre piece” (16:03). In his talk, Martens asked: “where were these
mountains really moved? Were they moved in Peru, as the piece shows? Or were they
maybe moved in Brussles?” (16:29).

4.1. « Anarcho-Realism Again »

The requirements Martens constructs in order for an artwork to have an ethical claim is
very similar to the logic of the anarcho-realist maxim as described by Suhail Malik.
Where the anarcho-realist maxim demanded the artwork do something to breakout of the
traditional confines of what art is or has been in order to fulfill an art historical demand,
Martens sees the need for the artwork to do something as an ethical requirement.
Martens' critique is founded on the idea of the trompe-l'œil painting being concerned with representation, or being an artwork, and its lack of being stuff (or doing something). The trompe-l’œil painting depicts a space or thing with precise rendering in order to have it appear to exist in reality, but is done solely through methods of representation and is concerned with the visual effect and what this effect means. As Suhail Malik argues, historically these works would have been seen as having some sort of criticality and virtue through their concerns with representation and artistic convention, not through the painting’s relation to a given social structure, as these things were seen as separate. With the contemporary requirement that an artwork do something, the baroque trompe-l’œil paintings are seen as failing the anarcho-realist maxim because they do not do anything in regards to the social system they are tethered to; they are not doing more than art already does, and this, for Martens, is an issue involving both art and ethics. Martens sees his work “Enjoy Poverty” as seemingly doing something for the Congo, rather than just constructing an image which speaks to the issues in the Congo. For Martens, this is an ethical judgement that gives an artwork a “political claim”, as he puts it.

Considered through another, social lens, Martens project does do something for the Congo, whether it is an artwork or not. In many ways it does follow the dogma of current contemporary art, of the anarcho-realist maxim—it breaks from all norms of contemporary art by using gentrification as an artistic strategy to materially better the lives of people living in the Congo. This deviates from previous indefinable artworks and does something outside of what has been considered art by the institutions of art, making it desirable as work of contemporary art within the contemporary art world. Considering the very calculated and fraught irony and apparently twisted morality of the work, it is not a stretch to posit that Martens understands the desirable artistic qualities of his work within the anarcho-realist maxim. Seemingly, he recognizes that this makes his project consumable and desired by the general contemporary art audience, which simultaneously enables the continuation of a process of material betterment for those involved with the project in the Congo.
4. « Epilogue »

Set alongside this text is an online artwork created as an accompanying component to this thesis. This artwork can be viewed at tiktoktextures.com. The online artwork features two components, the first of which being downloadable textures commonly utilised in texture mapping, created from screenshots of various TikTok videos. These textures are free to use and can be deployed by designers and artists for a multitude of functions. There are both seamless and bordered textures available, the seamless textures feature repeatable surfaces such as wood, fabric, stone, grass, and snow while the boarded textures function as facades and feature images of rooms, walls, and windows. The second component is a virtual interior space that features two rooms—a gallery space displaying the textures on the wall and a room that utilises texture mapping to feature the texture on walls, floors, etc. This space is available to view online via a website and allows the viewer to move about the spaces freely in a first person view.

The relationship between the written text and the artwork is not one of direct comparison or dichotomy. Rather, the artwork was developed with the written text in mind and as a guiding component, but is not wholly influenced or made to directly respond to the text. The artwork is indeed guided by the text, but also by my interest in the internet and its subcultures, materiality, semiotics, function in art, humour and pleasure, and value systems. I wish for the artwork to be seen as independent but related to the text, both actants in a network of ideas. Though they may appear disparate in form, the text and the artwork share an ethos in the desire to avoid conclusions and authoritative argument in favour of an active constellation of ideas.

In April and May of 2020 a song I produced and composed gained popularity on the video sharing platform TikTok. TikTok is a short form video sharing app where users are able to upload video that contains audio as well as create videos using specific audio already found on the app. When a user uploads a video, the audio of that video is uploaded separately, allowing other users to create their own videos using a wide variety
of previously uploaded audio. This creates a remixing ecosystem conducive to dancing, lip-syncing, comedy, and the general memetic activity primarily found on the internet. And this also allows certain audio to become synonymous with certain trends popular on the app.

Initially, I created the song as a distinctly separate activity from visual artists practice—music being a hobby and activity I undertook to relax. The collaborator and artist who released the song began posting the song on TikTok accompanying videos of him dancing, making jokes, following other TikTok trends, and encouraging others to create videos using the song. Slowly, we watched the song grow on TikTok, first having tens of videos containing the audio, and then hundreds, and then thousands, and now has over one million different videos containing the audio. The popularity of this song is due to its circulation on TikTok and the many different ways the users of the app have remixed the song and utilised it in creative ways.

The popularity of this song coincided with the middle period of my MFA, causing a great deal of my attention to be directed towards the song, the music industry, and the visual content that was being created around the song. In turn, this pushed many of the thoughts I had relating to who contemporary art is for, what kinds of predetermined knowledge one needs to enter an artwork, and what I wanted out of my various artistic practises to the fore. I realised that as a visual artist who is concerned with the ecosystems and information sharing habits on the internet, I could not turn away from the vast breadth of visual culture that has been created around a song I produced. I saw this as an opportunity to engage with user-based content and remixing culture in a manner that had a reason, a personal connection, and conviction. Taking the creativity of people who upload their own content on user-based content platforms seriously and thoughtfully, regardless of the content, was something I had been considering in response to the issues I perceived around the institutions of contemporary art.

These reflections, in combination with the COVID-19 pandemic, forced me to turn away from my sculptural studio based practice and pushed me to find an avenue to engage with
this content in a conceptually meaningful and personally fulfilling way. My studio work at this point in time was very physical and mainly concerned with material engagement, play and humour, and value systems within contemporary art. Due to the global pandemic, artworks were no longer being seen in person, and this was deeply discouraging and left me with no reason to produce physical objects knowing they would just be mediated by a screen. Considering this reality, in combination with the massive amount of digital visual imagery that was being created using or around the song, I came to the conclusion that I had no other option but to create work digitally. I also felt a sense of necessity as a visual artist to consider and respond thoughtfully to the visual imagery that was created around the song I had made.

I began the project that ultimately led to the development of my thesis project by creating works that feature videos people have made using the song I created, but I removed all audio from these videos and presented them silence. Using this technique, I eventually produced and showed a video work that featured a video found on YouTube of a young person dancing to the song in roller-skates and pyjamas in a small bedroom. This was an important step in the process of working with this content, but I felt these works were incomplete or required some sort of supplementary aspect in order to communicate everything I was interested in or felt was necessary to fully realize the project. For the full context of the work. After this, I began experimenting with virtual reality technology and 360 images—I began a process where I would take a screenshot from a TikTok video that utilised the song I created, and manipulate these images in order for them to contain images of the rooms the videos were filmed in. I would then stitch these images together and create a 360 image of an interior entirely made up of various scenes from videos that featured my song—I found this to be much more conceptually fulfilling but it still was not totally formally satisfying.

Realising these interiors were speaking further towards my intentions and goals than the previous iteration of the work, I continued to pursue this avenue of creating digital interior spaces that utilised images from visual content that responded to the song I created. Using the popular video game engine Unity, I began designing a fully
39

dimensional interior space that featured hallways, rooms, corridors, and entryways, rather than the previous 360 images that were static and did not allow movement of the viewer. These new interior spaces were no longer an illusion of space created by folding static images—like the previous 360 images I had created—they were now entire spaces that allow for movement and viewing from all angles. In 3D modelling design, images that wrap around shapes and structures so as to give them a facade are known as textures. These textures can be used to create everything from flooring or carpet, to the skin of a person, to a stop sign: they are images made by artists designed to stretch around something to create a facade of that thing. In order for me to utilise the images from TikToks people had made to the song, I had to translate the images from TikTok into textures that would be compatible in any 3D design program. I undertook a process of finding videos on TikTok that utilised the song and had some sort of interior space, outdoor space, or interesting texture that I could then screenshot and manipulate to create fully usable textures within my interior space. Upon completing many tests and a final iteration of an interior space that was textured using the textures I created from TikTok, I realised the textures themselves were speaking more directly to my conceptual interests than the interior space that utilised the textures.

After some conversations with my peers and advisor I found putting more attention towards the textures themselves rather than the interior space as a whole would be more conceptually clear and speak more thoughtfully to my interests, many of which align with the discussion and critique the accompanying essay focuses on. To accompany the interior space I have made, I released all the textures I used as a free downloadable texture pack on the internet, allowing users to download the texture pack and use it to texture their own work or creations. I found this to be much more aligned with my initial interests in the internet’s ecosystem of remixing and open collaboration. Releasing these textures as free, usable files allows the work’s further proliferation and ensures it has a life outside of my own intentions, iterations, and wishes. The reader will note that my the foregoing is not explicit about how this project speaks to my preoccupations with art's institutional alliances and problems. Rather, I offer it as an experimental project that uses
an approach that is analogous to the text, involving a constellation of forms, ideas and strategies that I hope will point to new ways of considering culture and the moment we are in.


Debersaques, Simon. "Cultural facilities and urban development: WIELS contemporary art center and the transformation of a working-class neighborhood." *Brussels*


Curriculum Vitae

Name: Declan Hoy

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:
2019 BFA with Distinction in Drawing, Alberta University of the Arts, Calgary, AB

Honours and Awards:
2021
SOCAN Viral Song Award, Society of Composers Authors and Music Publishers of Canada, Toronto, ON

2019
Chair Entrance Scholarship, University of Western Ontario, London, ON

2018
Louis McKinney Scholarship, Alberta University of the Arts, Calgary, AB
Illingworth Kerr Scholarship, Alberta University of the Arts, Calgary, AB

Related Work Experience
Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2019-2021

Bibliography
2018 Sawicz, Justyna. "That's a Bad Photo." Luma Quarterly, vol. 03, no.12, Spring 2018