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California Center for Population Research
University of California - Los Angeles

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CONTEMPORARY ART: A 'GLOBAL' AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE VIA NEW YORK'S CHELSEA DISTRICT

David Halle and Elisabeth Tiso

ABSTRACT

Chelsea's art gallery district on Manhattan's Far West Side is now probably the most important location worldwide for sales of new works of Contemporary Art, so understanding Chelsea is crucial for the goal of mapping key cultural enterprises worldwide. We first view Chelsea in the context of the international Contemporary Art market, looking especially at art fairs and auctions. We then discuss detailed material from Chelsea. Our central finding is the major (though not total) irreducibility between two central spheres, on the one hand the economic markets in which the art is traded, and on the other hand the content of the art and its meaning for the audience as they view it displayed in the galleries. Although the market is crucial in all kinds of ways, the content of the art that is traded and its meaning for the audience cannot typically be reduced to economics, or usefully be analyzed primarily in economic terms. This is not to argue for the 'autonomy of aesthetics' but it is to argue that the aesthetic domain here is in many ways shaped by, and responds to, a different set of dynamics than the market domain. Both spheres are important for understanding the world of Contemporary Art and modern society and to study one but not the other gives a misleadingly one-sided view.

Chelsea's art gallery district on Manhattan's Far West Side is now probably the most important location worldwide for sales of new works of Contemporary Art (defined here as works produced by artists who are still alive or recently deceased). For example, at

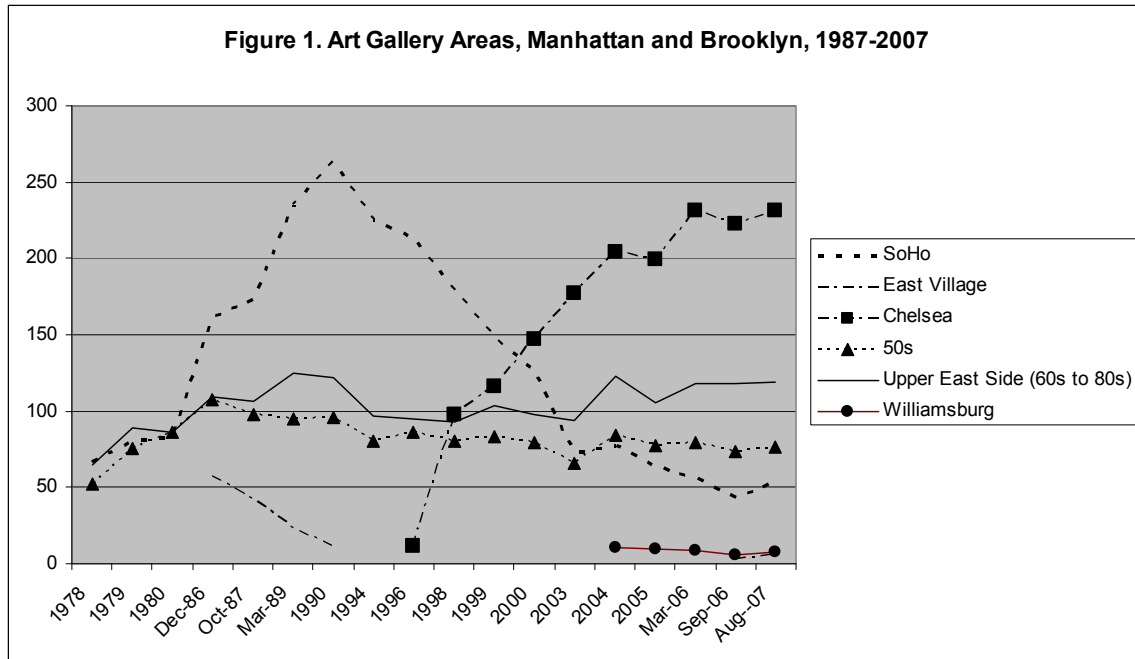
Art Basel 2007, the world's leading annual fair for Contemporary Art, there will be 31 galleries from Chelsea. The next largest gallery contingent, way behind, is Berlin with 22, followed by London with 18. Understanding Chelsea is clearly important for the goal of mapping key cultural enterprises across the world.

Chelsea's rise occurred with stunning speed. From 1996 to 2007 (July), the number of Chelsea galleries grew from 12 to at least 260 (almost all commercial rather than non-profit), dwarfing other art districts in the United States and elsewhere. Galleries in SoHO, once New York City's most dynamic gallery neighborhood, fell to about 44 and many former SoHO galleries have re-located to Chelsea. (See Figure 1)

In this chapter we adopt a dual strategy. We first view Chelsea in the context of the international Contemporary Art market, looking in particular at art fairs and auctions. We then discuss detailed material from Chelsea. This strategy, placing the 'global' in a local context, solves a general dilemma facing research on cultural enterprises. On the one hand it is important to understand the international context. Yet to do only this is typically insufficient. In this case of the cultural economy of Contemporary Art, for example, it overlooks a close examination of how a local art market actually functions and especially it overlooks an analysis of the art itself--its content and meaning for the audience. One consequence, especially if discussion focuses on markets and 'globalism', is to imply that the art too is primarily about markets and economics. Our Chelsea research suggests that this is often a serious exaggeration and even just wrong. On the contrary, for most of the Chelsea audience the art above all speaks to central themes in

the audience's lives (e.g. the modern family, the landscape and environmental threats to it). Indeed, the irreducibility of these two key sectors—the markets (local and 'global') on the one hand and the art's content and meaning for the audience on the other hand—is our central substantive finding in this chapter.

It is important, at the outset, to clarify the concept of 'global.' It is not, for example, fruitful to classify everything with an international dimension as 'global'. Discussing this issue, Michael Mann (2007) has usefully distinguished six geographical/spatial interaction networks, five of which are less than 'global'. These are local (any sub-national network of interaction), national (networks bounded by states, though not necessarily organized by states), international (between national units), macro-regional (transnational but regionally bounded), transnational (transcending the boundaries of the national and potentially global) and global (the extension and intensification of social relations over the globe). In what follows, we will argue, when discussing international art fairs and auction houses and following Mann's typology, that these are actually 'macro-regional' in character rather than global. We will also often place 'global' in quotes so as not to beg the question of whether what is being discussed is truly 'global'.



International Art Fairs

The growth of annual international art fairs is one key development underlying the perception that the art world is becoming increasingly international and ‘global’. These fairs, composed primarily of commercial art galleries, in principle allow galleries from any country to sell their art abroad, at least for the few days the fair lasts, thereby promoting a gallery’s stable of artists in a market/country outside its home base(s). Art fairs, therefore, constitute one suitable terrain for examining ‘globalization’ in the Contemporary Art market.

Art Basel (Switzerland) bills itself as ‘the world’s premier modern and contemporary art fair,’ and few in the art world would disagree. Competition among galleries to be selected (by an admissions committee) for Art Basel is ferocious. Ranked behind Art

Basel is a group of international fairs including New York's Armory show, Frieze in London, ARCO in Madrid, FIAC in Paris, and Art Basel Miami Beach. These fairs were all basically established in their current forms in the last decade, underlining the rapidity of this international market's growth.

Analysis of the geographic origins—by nation, city and neighborhood – of the galleries selected for Art Basel in June 2007, is illuminating. Considering first national origins, there is a clear concentration of galleries from a handful of countries located in two regions, the United States and Western Europe, which together account for 90 per cent of the 242 galleries selected. Twenty-five per cent of the galleries are from the United States, clearly the most numerous contingent. German galleries are in second place, with 19 per cent, followed by galleries from Switzerland (13 per cent), England (8 per cent), France (7 per cent) and Italy (6 per cent). (See Table 1). Although Art Basel's claim to showcase galleries from all five continents is formally correct, representation from Africa is tiny (one gallery from South Africa), small from Latin America (just two galleries from Mexico and three from Brazil), and modest from Asia despite the burgeoning economies of China and India (four galleries from Japan, two from South Korea, one from China, none from India). Analysis of galleries at The Armory Show and Frieze confirms this picture.

Turning from national to city data, New York City clearly tops the hierarchy. It accounted for 21 per cent of all the galleries accepted at Art Basel 2007, over twice as many as Berlin, the second largest city represented with 9 per cent of all the galleries, followed by London (7 per cent), Zurich (6 per cent) and Paris (5 per cent). (See Table

2). Finally, analysis within New York City shows Chelsea’s dominance over other gallery districts there. Galleries located in Chelsea account for 63 per cent of all New York galleries selected for Art Basel. Manhattan’s East 50s neighborhood is a distant second, constituting 12 per cent of the New York galleries, followed by the East 70s (Table 3).

Table 1. Number of Galleries, by Country, at Key International Art Fairs^a			
Art Basel (Switzerland) 2007		Armory Show (NY), 2007	Frieze (London) 2006 [redo with 2007 data]
United States	61 (25%)	51 (42%)	36 (24%)
Germany	46 (19%)	16 (13%)	26 (17%)
Switzerland	32 (13%)	3 (2%)	7 (5%)
England	20 (8%)	21 (17%)	29 (19%)
France	16 (7%)	-	6 (4%)
Italy	14 (6%)	5 (4%)	8 (5%)
Spain	7	1	3
Austria	6	3	7
Holland	5	2	4
Belgium	4	2	1
Japan	4	5	3
Brazil	3	-	

Sweden		3	
Scotland		1	3
Denmark	-	-	3
Canada, Greece, Mexico, South Korea, Poland, Sweden	2	2 Korea	2 Greece, Brazil
China, Finland, Ireland, Israel , Norway, Portugal, Russia, Scotland, Slovenia, South Africa, Turkey	1	1 Turkey, Mexico, India, Israel, South Africa, Ireland, Greece, Romania	1 Sweden, Ireland, Slovenia, Russia, Portugal, Israel, Egypt, China, South Korea
Total	242	122	150

^a Source: Art 38Basel (2007), Frieze (2007), Armory Show (2007). Although some galleries have locations in more than one country, the art fair websites referenced here typically list only one country per gallery, presumably the country the gallery considers its main base.

Table 2. Art Basel 2007: Number of Galleries Represented, per City	
New York	51 (21%)
Berlin	22 (9%)
London	18 (7%)
Zurich	16 (6%)
Paris	16 (5%)
Cologne	12 (3%)
Basel	7
Milan	6
Madrid	6
Vienna	5
Los Angeles	4
Geneva	4
Brussels	4
Tokyo	4
Sao Paolo	3
Munich	3
Amsterdam	3
San Francisco	3

Antwerp, Athens, Chicago, Düsseldorf, Seoul, Stockholm, Turin, Verona	2
Barcelona, Bochum, Glarus, Dortmund, Dresden, Dublin, Frankfurt am Main, Glasgow, Hamburg, Helsinki, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Karlsruhe, Krakow, Lausanne, Lisbon, Ljubljana, Lucerne, Lugano, Montreal, Moscow, Oslo, Oxley, Rome, Salzburg, San Gimignano, Santa Monica, St. Moritz, Shanghai, Tel-Aviv, Toronto, Venice, Warsaw, Wiltshire,	1
Total	242

Table 3. Art Basel 2007: United States Galleries, by City and by New York City District	
New York	51
Chelsea	32 (63%)
SoHo	2 (4%)
East 50s	7 (12%)
East 60s	2 (4%)
East 70s	5 (10%)
East 80s	3 (6%)
Los Angeles	4
San Francisco	3
Chicago	2

Santa Monica	1
Total	61

To summarize, the world of art fairs basically involves circulation around a select group of fairs by a select number of art galleries, mostly from a few key cities in Western Europe and North America, with New York’s Chelsea gallery neighborhood at the apex. In Mann’s spatial typology, these relationships are ‘macro-regional’ not strictly ‘global’. In a superb discussion Quemain (2006) has generalized this point, based on detailed empirical research, beyond art fairs and commercial art galleries. As he put it, despite enormously increased international mobility, ‘...the world of contemporary art has a centre of gravity which revolves around a duopoly formed by the US on the one hand and a small number of Western European countries on the other hand...In contrast to this western centre is an ‘artistic periphery’ that consists of the remaining countries—not just third World but Japan, Canada, Spain, etc.’

International Auction Houses

Auction houses, the art resale market, are a second key source of the perception that the art market is increasingly ‘global.’ Auction houses are represented above all by the power houses, Sotheby’s and Christie’s, each of which has sales operations in multiple locations around the world. We focus here on data from Christie’s, the biggest house

with overall 2006 sales of \$4.7 billion, in order to answer two questions. First, how important are particular cities/regions in the secondary market for art? Second, how does this vary for specific categories of art? As with art fairs, the results show concentration in a limited number of geographic areas, but with some significant differences. For example, Asia, represented by Hong Kong, is an important secondary market site and Asian Contemporary Art is a significant part of the burgeoning secondary market in Contemporary Art.

City/Regional Strengths

New York and London dominate the auction market for art, with 45 per cent and 30 per cent of all Christie's 2006 sales revenue respectively. Hong Kong is third, though far back, with 8 per cent, followed by France with 5 per cent and a tiny new presence from Dubai. (See Table 4.)

The mostly European absence (except for London and Paris) from the auction market partly reflects a set of European cultural attitudes towards auctions that have a long history. Selling art by auction has never been socially completely accepted in most of Europe and is still often considered somewhat crass and 'too public' a commercial transaction. London is an exception, which, especially since Thatcher, is far more favorably disposed to commerce than most of Europe. In general, the contrast is stark between gallery sales-- where the prices that a work has sold for are a carefully guarded secret linked to the privacy of the buyer/collector--and auction sales. The spectacle that

auctions provide is likely more attractive to the American, London-based, and Asian collectors, who are often eager to show their wealth in a glamorous auction setting. Distaste for auctions is also tax related. Wealthy Europeans are often eager to avoid government attention and associated taxes—mostly higher than in the United States (or Britain).

Table 4. Worldwide Annual Sales of Art, by Category, Location and Year, at Christie's Auction House^a		
	2006	2005
Impressionist/Modern	1.23 billion (18)* New York 764m London 221 m Paris 10m	680 m
Post-War and Contemporary Art	822 m (23) New York 565m London 180m Hong Kong 62m Paris 8m	560 m
Asian Art	438 m Hong Kong 306m	391 m

	New York 66m London 26m Paris 5m	
Jewelry and Watches	408 m (12 --.38m H.K.)	283m .
Old Master Pictures.	256 m (18) London 157m New York 77m Amsterdam 2m	208 m
Other	1.51b	
Total	4.67 billion	3.43 billion
New York	2.1 billion (45%)	1.4 billion
London	1.4 billion (30%)	917m
Hong Kong	355m (8%)	286m
France	250m (5%)	141m
Dubai	8.5m (0.2%)	
Other	1.1billion (25%)	

^a Source: Christies, Jan 11, 2007.

*Data in parentheses indicate the number of auction sales that year. A day's sale that is broken into sessions such as morning and evening is counted as two sales.



Particular Artistic Genres

Regarding auction sales of particular categories of art, the most lucrative by far was Impressionist/modern with \$1.2 billion or 26 per cent of all sales. (See table 4.) ‘Post-war and Contemporary’ was Christie’s second most lucrative area, bringing in \$822m or 18 per cent of all sales. (‘Contemporary’ and ‘post-war’ art are merged in the data, as are ‘Impressionist ‘ and ‘modern’. Recall that on the whole ‘Contemporary’ refers to artists who are alive.) Old Masters lags far behind, with just 5 per cent (\$256m) in 2006.

Artistic Genres by Cities/Regions

Combining the data on types of art and on specific cities/regions, New York is paramount in both largest categories, Impressionist/modern and Contemporary/post-war, substantially outselling London, the second strongest site for these genres. New York sold 764m of Impressionist/modern, roughly three-and-a-half times London’s 221m, and New York sold 565m of Contemporary/post-war art, roughly three times as much as London’s 180m.(See table 4.). London’s strength vis-à-vis New York is Old Masters, where it sold 157m roughly twice as much as New York.

Hong Kong’s strength, unsurprisingly, is Asian art. Its 306m overall sales of Asian art were roughly five times more than second placed (for Asian art) London. Traditional

Chinese art (e.g. jewellery, jade, ceramics, watches, classical paintings) is the largest component of Hong Kong's Asian sales by far, (62 per cent). But 44m of Hong Kong sales are in Contemporary Asian Art (a category consisting of 'Asian Contemporary Art' and 'Modern and Contemporary South East Asian Art'), and a separate category '20th Century Chinese Art', garnered 74m in sales. Together these categories, Contemporary, Modern and 20th century constituted 39 per cent of all Hong Kong sales, which probably reflects the existence of recently wealthy Asian entrepreneurs interested in new, not just traditional, Asian art. There is also now a lively market for contemporary Asian Art outside Asia (Hong Kong). For example, New York had an 18m sale of 'Modern and Contemporary Indian Art' in 2006, which reflects the interest of non-Asians in Contemporary Asian Art, just as non-Asians have long been interested in classical Asian Art.

To summarize, the auction market and art fairs are more appropriately classified as 'macro-regional' (i.e., transnational but regionally bounded) than 'global'. Each involves a limited number of international sites, with New York leading both markets. An interesting difference is that, while the art fair world remains dominated by galleries from the United States and Western Europe, in the auction market Asia, represented by Hong Kong, has a significant presence and Asian Contemporary Art is now important in the burgeoning auction market for Contemporary Art.

The Local Market

The analysis so far shows a world of Contemporary Art dominated by a limited number of players—elite art galleries, and auction houses—focused on a limited number of macro-regional sites. This is correct as an analysis of the international market, but needs to be set alongside the detailed Chelsea material which is not well captured by the idea that the world of Contemporary Art is dominated by elite organizations (galleries, fairs, auction houses) operating in macro-regional markets driven primarily by profit maximization on the part of the audience, producers and distributors. The world of Contemporary Art, when viewed at its most important local site—Chelsea-- turns out to be too interesting and complex to be viewed exclusively through a single lens. Because of space limits, and because we have written about some of these Chelsea features elsewhere (Halle 2007), the salient features of Chelsea are presented here briefly.

The Multiplication and Persistence of Small Galleries

Despite the presence of a sizeable contingent of elite, global galleries, Chelsea would not be the dense art gallery neighborhood that it is without the plethora of small, boutique size galleries, owned by individuals not corporations, that make up the majority of the gallery scene. For the purposes of obtaining an accurate numerical count, the elite galleries can be distinguished from the rest in several ways. These include a ground floor location, which is easily accessible to the public, rather than an upper floor; participation in at least one of the major annual fairs; and having a roster of artists at least one of whose work has an established secondary market, measured by having been resold at Sotheby's or Christie's. Using the first criterion, upper or ground floor location, roughly

60 per cent (210 galleries) of all the galleries in Chelsea are non-elite (having an upper floor location.)

This co-existence in the same environment of elite and a plethora of small operations has some parallels to dominant centers in other creative industries such as Silicon Valley. Thomas Crow (1996: 34) too has commented on the fact that so much of the gallery system exists at the ‘artisanal level.’ Our interviews in Chelsea also found that gallery owners, often motivated by ‘art for art’s sake,’ may be willing to settle for less profit than ‘humdrum entrepreneurs,’ which also helps explain the existence of dense concentrations of small galleries.

The Best Free Show in Town

Unlike the established art museums in New York City, which charge admissions (entry to the recently re-opened MoMA is \$20), Chelsea galleries impose no entry charge, do not pressure the onlookers to buy, and are open and welcoming. Further, data from our interviews with samples of the audience show that the vast majority (over 95 per cent) of the audience come just to look, with absolutely no intention of purchasing art. The major purchasers (serious collectors) typically attend private showings arranged specially for them and even buy works based on photos (e.g. viewed via the internet). The rest of the audience are therefore, viewers but arguably not ‘consumers’ if that term refers to people whose role is to purchase goods in the market. This absence of an admission charge runs counter to the strong tendency in the modern world towards the ‘commercialization of leisure life’, whereby a growing proportion of spare time consists of events for which

admission is paid. A large commercial locus such as Chelsea offers, ironically, this huge, no-charge benefit for the public.

Further, in other cultural spheres when the 'show' is free audiences typically pay another price, for example long lines for admission or second-rate performers. What is interesting, and perhaps even unique about Chelsea, is that it is the elite galleries that make art by the very best of Contemporary Artists available in the most easily accessible form. The audience simply step right off the street into these galleries, whereas visiting the majority of (lesser) galleries usually involves ascending to a non-ground level floor. This feature appears to distinguish Chelsea from other key 'cultural enterprises' such as Hollywood and Silicon Valley. Whether this set-up (the free show) is 'rational' for the galleries (e.g arguing that the non-buying public attending the 'free show' create 'buzz' around the work and artist which in some ways validates the work and encourages the collectors to buy), or something that just emerged, is not yet clear.

Commercial Galleries as Opportunities for Artists

Although nearly every Chelsea gallery is commercial, almost all the artists, whether successful or struggling, say that the Chelsea galleries generally offer them far more freedom and opportunity than do not-for-profit museums and other institutions, in New York or elsewhere. The artists mostly consider that museum directors and curators tend to be more conservative and focused on established art and less open to new art and

artists than the typical gallery owner/director. Above all, the artists that we interviewed do not, on the whole, see the gallery system as a structure of dominance or oppression.

An Occupational Community of 'Gallerists'

Chelsea is not a residential community of artists. From its start as a gallery district in the mid 1990s few artists could afford to live there, and they certainly cannot now. (SoHo was, by contrast, an occupational and residential community of artists who produced art from their lofts/homes.) Yet Chelsea has developed into an occupational community of people who work in/run/own galleries, and a special term 'gallerists' has emerged to describe this phenomenon. Indeed, Chelsea's gallerists are not well described as an impersonal set of atomistic units locked in ferocious competition, one stereotype of market relations. Rather, they arguably have many of the positive aspects associated with the idea of 'community.'

The Local Commercial Real Estate Market: Will Chelsea go the Way of SoHo?.

The local features described so far could not be deduced from a model that stressed a 'global' market of oligopolistic players, although they are not incompatible with that model. Still, some features of Chelsea do fit more closely such a model. Above all, every Chelsea gallery must deal with Manhattan's ferocious real estate market. Indeed, Chelsea's very rise was real estate-driven. Rents soared in SoHo from 1995-1999, fuelled by an influx of clothing boutiques and forcing a mass exodus to Chelsea of galleries that could not afford the new rents.

Not surprisingly, a much debated topic among Chelsea gallery owners and other observers is whether real estate developments will eventually cause a similar, SoHO-style debacle. Learning from that, most of those galleries that came to Chelsea with sufficient capital bought their spaces so as to insulate themselves from the commercial rental market. The other galleries, the vast majority, signed leases and are at the mercy of the commercial real estate market, which in Manhattan has no controls. At the end of the typical five year lease, plus a five year option to extend, landlords can charge whatever they can get.

Emerging Gallery-Auction House Conflict

Chelsea too is a site to study an emerging challenge by auction houses to the long prevailing division of labor in the art market between art galleries and auction houses. Recently auction houses have begun to move into the galleries' lucrative market for primary works. The brashest, and most successful, such challenger is located in Chelsea. Phillips de Pury, an auction house founded in London in 1796, in 2003 moved its headquarters to Chelsea in a spectacular space just north of the Meatpacking district on 15th Street. What is innovative is that in 2006 Phillips began what it called "Selling Exhibitions" where it displayed and sold brand new works that had never been on the market before. To stress its new, dual role as both gallery and auction house, Phillips repackaged itself as an "art company that does auctions" (of Contemporary Art, photography, design and jewelry), not just an auction company.

This intrusion into the gallery world by Phillips de Pury was followed by Christie's February, 2007 purchase of Haunch of Venison, a contemporary art gallery in London and Zürich, with plans announced to open a gallery in New York, in Rockefeller Center in the Fall. This move was less drastic than Phillips's, since Christie's was not (yet) itself selling new works, and auction houses have owned galleries in the past, though never a successful one. Still, given Christie's size, the move has raised enormous attention, and often anxiety, in the gallery world, alongside Phillips's explicit abandoning of the traditional division of labor.

These intrusions by auction houses merit close study. For example, will the auction houses drive the gallery world towards the kind of concentrations long present in other creative industries such as publishing and movie production and of which the auction world, long dominated by the Sotheby's/Christie's duopoly, is an extreme form?

The Content of the Art Displayed in Chelsea

Content analysis of the art displayed in Chelsea galleries, combined with interviews with the audience about what the art means for them, also suggests a very different set of dynamics than those discussed in the analysis of the 'global' market for Contemporary Art. The art displayed in Chelsea is above all about major, on-going issues in people's lives. Again, for reasons of space the analysis is shortened. Five topics dominate the

content of the art displayed in Chelsea, to the point of being arguably obsessions. Each of these topics constitutes at least 13 per cent of all the works in the sample. See Table 5.

Depictions of landscapes/nature constitute 25 per cent of all the topics sampled. These landscapes divide into two main kinds. There is the classic ‘good stretch of countryside/water/sky’ (13 per cent of all the topics). This vision featured prominently in Western landscape art over the last 200 years. It clearly remains immensely popular.

% OF ALL SHOWS (n=32)^b	TABLE 5. SUBJECT MATTER OF THE ART SHOWS IN THE SIXTEEN MOST IMPORTANT (‘STAR’) CHELSEA GALLERIES^a
MAJOR TOPICS^{c d}	
25%	LANDSCAPES Classic landscapes (Beautiful views) (13%) Environmental Landscapes (Landscape is threatened) (9%) Political (2%)
25%	SEX Sexual activity and/or focus on sex organs (13%) Nudes or semi-nudes (without sexual activity or focus on sex organs) (13%)
16%	DECORATIVE/ABSTRACT
16%	TROUBLED NUCLEAR FAMILY
16%	NATURAL FORMS/MAN-MADE BASIC MATERIALS
MINOR TOPICS	

9%	POOR, THOSE IN TROUBLE (Poor, addicts, etc)
6%	MASS PRODUCTION/COMMODITIES
6%	POLITICAL
3%	RELIGION

^a *The galleries include: Paula Cooper, Matthew Marks, Barbara Gladstone, Larry Gagosian, Metro Pictures, Robert Miller, Marlborough, Mary Boone, Andrea Rosen, Luhring Augustine, James Cohan, Pace Wildenstein, Cheim and Read, Galerie Lelong, Sonnabend, Marianne Boesky. A different group of experts would probably not pick an exactly similar list of 'star' galleries, but we believe there would be agreement on the vast majority in the list.*

^b *The research is still in progress, with n=32 so far. The plan is to sample each 'star' gallery three times, making a total of 48 shows..*

^c *Classifying the content of the art is not straightforward. For example, a depiction of a naked female could, in theory, be about at least one or several of the following-- classic mythology, anatomy of the nude, eroticism, or feminism. So, in classifying the works we supplemented this 'objective' look with a second perspective that considers the artist's intentions. We derived these intentions from the written materials that accompany most shows, since these typically have the artist's approval.*

^d *Several of the works/shows covered more than one topic. If the topic constituted a third or more of the show it was assigned 1 point. Thus some shows could count for up to 3 points. These 'multi-topic' works/shows therefore have more weight in the overall table than single topic works/shows. We did this because our aim is to understand which topics are most widespread in Contemporary Art, so if a show has three topics that should be recorded. This is why the percentages in Table 1 sum to over 100.*

The second type of landscape, 9 per cent of all topics and almost as common among Chelsea landscapes as the first, is 'radical environmental.' These landscapes foreground concern, and often alarm, about the deterioration of the natural environment. This genre

is in many ways new since the 1960s and clearly reflects a widespread alarm, and even social panic, at the possible damage humans have done to their world.

Sex as a topic is just as popular as landscapes, constituting 25 per cent of all the topics of the art displayed. About half of these images depict sexual activity—most often intercourse between male and female. The other half of the images classified as ‘sex’ here just depict people naked or semi-naked, usually women. These are therefore akin to the classic nude of art history.

Like ‘radical environmental art,’ sexual intercourse is unusual in Western art, at least for the last two millennia. Naked or semi-naked men and women pervade the history of Western art, but they have rarely been depicted as engaged in sexual activity. (There are some exceptions. Indian art, for example, has a well known tradition of eroticism, as did classical Greek pottery.)

A third topic is the nuclear family, but typically depicted with a critical or satirical edge as a troubled institution (16 per cent of all topics). Serenely confident families and individual family members, of the kind depicted by Norman Rockwell, are so rare as to be almost taboo. This topic—the problematic family—is also a new genre in art history. While troubled families have obviously existed in actuality throughout history, artists or patrons did not depict them in a sufficiently systematic way so as to make them a recognizable genre.

The fourth topic (16 per cent of all topics) is the decorative/mostly pure design. Grouped under the umbrella of 'abstract' art, this topic was seen by an 'avant garde' in the twentieth century as the apogee of art, superior in almost every way to other specific topics depicted in representative or figurative art. These claims are now widely seen as exaggerated (e.g. Gardner 2005). In Contemporary Art as displayed in Chelsea, the abstract/decorative has settled into a more modest, though still important, position as (just) one of five themes.

A fifth topic is raw/basic materials, either of nature (wood, stone etc) or manmade (steel I beams, plastic structures), along with a related interest in the basic constituents of our world. This subject also clearly has affinities with the first topic of landscapes as well as with discoveries in modern science especially molecular biology.

The general picture obtained from considering these five topics does not fit the view that the art is primarily about trading and making money in a global market. On the contrary the topics are mostly rooted in modern life and in the varied ways that people (artists and audience) experience today's world. For example, environmental landscapes seem rooted in post-1960s alarm about the deteriorating natural environment. Sexual intercourse seems to mimic current interest in pornography, especially promoted by the web. The troubled nuclear family mimics today's high divorce rate as well as the growing prominence of same-sex relations. Interviews with samples of the audience for particular shows likewise suggest that these themes flourish because they resonate with the audience's lives in an ongoing, creative, and interactive way.

It is true that for some of the tiny minority of the audience who intend to purchase, namely the ‘collectors’, the work may also be a financial investment. But even here a conflation of the market-oriented analysis with an analysis of the art and its meaning short-circuits the question of how certain works and artists come to be sufficiently attractive in the first place to constitute a promising investment. The central answer suggested here is that the works resonate with the lives of the audience.

Conclusions

Our conclusions are methodological, substantive, and policy related. Substantively, a central finding is the major (though not total) irreducibility between two central spheres, on the one hand the economic markets (and related sectors) in which the art is traded, and on the other hand the content of the art itself, and its meaning for the audience as they view it displayed in the galleries. Although the market is crucial in all kinds of ways, the content of the art that is traded and its meaning for the audience cannot typically be reduced to economics, or usefully be analyzed primarily in economic terms. This is not to argue for the ‘autonomy of aesthetics’ but it is to argue that the aesthetic domain in this case is in many ways shaped by, and responds to, a different set of dynamics than the market domain. Both spheres are important for an understanding of the world of Contemporary Art and modern society and to look at one but not the other gives a misleadingly one-sided view.

Our central methodological conclusion follows from this. We need to look at cultural phenomena both globally and locally and beware of partial analyses that omit salient data. It is hard to adequately research and understand the meaning (including aesthetic meaning) of cultural phenomena without some detailed local/case study research. Hence it seems unlikely that a single theory or perspective can properly capture the complexity of an important component of the cultural economy like Contemporary Art.

A related conclusion is the importance of being open, via empirical research, to the unexpected. For example, despite the existence of a contingent of elite galleries that are active in the ferocious global market, the vast majority of Chelsea galleries are small shops offering a series of opportunities to young artists that are far superior to their chances in the art museum world. Moreover the elite galleries offer an unparalleled free show of the very best of Contemporary Art to an audience few of whom intend to buy, and who are therefore viewers but not plausibly ‘consumers’ Further, although Chelsea is far too expensive a neighborhood to support a residential community of artists, the dense network of galleries does support an occupational community of ‘gallerists’.

Finally, two policy implications. First, Chelsea represents the triumph of the commercial gallery system as a way of nurturing and bringing to prominence artists and their works. It’s most obvious contrast is the ‘French model’, the view that official, usually state-sponsored, competitions judged by impartial experts are the most appropriate way to select meritorious art and artists, whereas the market model sacrifices (‘sells out’) quality to commerce. Chelsea’s success, and the continued relative decline of French art and

artists, suggests that the market model has a lot to recommend it. Needless to say, this topic is complex and needs further research.

A second policy implication results from the popularity of environmentalist art. In the real world, many 'local' environmental issues clearly cannot be solved only on the local level, and this geo-political reality now informs the aesthetic fabric of one crucial component of Contemporary Art, namely environmental art. Here, appropriately, the local and global have also merged, a cause, in this case, for approval, not concern.

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