

Architecture of the Contemporary Art Market



Interior of front space of Chelsea art gallery exhibiting Andy Warhol prints.

DAY 7 Today is Monday, January 9th, and we begin our study of the contemporary art market with Olav Velthuis'

Talking Prices: the Symbolic Meaning of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art. Read the introduction, chapters one and two. What are some of the factors that support the architecture of the art market? Consider the spaces for the sale and exhibition of art; the cultural value of art; the symbolic value of art and the players and/or playing fields involved in setting the prices for contemporary art. In your response, choose a specific example of a particular aspect of the architecture of the art market (i.e. the gallery spaces used for selling art that the author discusses – front room, back room, etc.; the auction house; or the different kinds of galleries – traditional, contemporary, etc.) or a theoretical aspect of the market and/or pricing and valuation (i.e. "hostile worlds" viewpoint) to further elucidate your point. Include images or links to support your response.

Readings

Selected chapters from Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

Introduction and Chapter 1: [TalkingPricesIntroCh1.pdf](#)

Chapter 2: [TalkingPricesCh2.pdf](#)

Highly Recommended, Erica Coslor, "Hostile Worlds and Questionable Speculation: Recognizing the Plurality of Views about Art and the Market," *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 2010.

[EricaCoslor_Hostile_worlds.pdf](#)

Individual Contributions

Charles Saunders

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Christina Chaplin

The art market is not like other markets. It is a place thoroughly entrenched in its competing sides of culture and commerce. In the "Hostile Worlds View", the two spheres of culture and economy represent the two primary ways to value artworks in the modern market. It claims that these spheres, or factors, are independent of each other and damaging to the value of the art in either sense to combine them. While I am not necessarily one hundred percent in agreement with this statement, as I will illustrate later, it explains much about the physical and social architecture of the modern art market as it has developed.

Because many gallery owners understand the fact that they, according to this model, operate in two spheres at once, the physical space for primary contemporary sales is split into two places as well, each correlating to a different realm. In the front room, the art is kept in a pure state of exhibition. The architecture is sparse without decoration or "comforts" which could be seen as marketing or advertising ploys. There is little to no information immediately available to a visitor about pricing, which happens instead upon request. The visitor is also purposefully not harassed by employees present, and allowed to look on in peace for their own enjoyment. The back room is another story. It is a place for money to exchange hands, business deals to be made, and secretive transactions behind closed doors which allow the front room to maintain its pure distance from the back. The back room is often more like an office or a store room for works to be held and then sold. There are computers, and paper work, and price lists, and chairs, a combination which often reminds me of the dealings of a car dealership. Gallery owners have developed this gallery architecture as a way to emphasize the cultural value of art as objects that need to be displayed for the joy of seeing them, while also acknowledging the need for transactions to keep their businesses afloat.

A bare gallery space.

In the instance of gallery sales, the gallery owners hope that a piece will never again be sold or at least not for many years. It is their belief that such sales would harm the cultural value of the piece by replacing it with economic value. According to the research presented in the writings, many think that by even assigning art a monetary value, we diminish its worth as culturally important. One common thought is that purchasing power in the hands of collectors who are not experts, and thus buy things they think are "pretty" instead of important works at high prices, has the ability to homogenize the art market. The market is thus flooded with mediocre work and overlooks the more consequential pieces. Another fear is that buyer only concerned with the status of the work and its economic value would overlook pieces of worth for pieces of price in order to increase their collection's "sign value". In this scenario, the art market runs parallel to strategies for branding of products and the exchange of art as stocks and bonds.

In the Hostile Worlds View, the gallery is seen as a symbolic solution based on the traditions of "appropriate" spaces to make transactions. They can emphasize the cultural value of the art, true. But more importantly, they care about the art and the artist and create lasting relationships to support both. Here, the gallery is seen as a meeting place for social networking which will enhance the cultural experience of the work for the buyer. Collectors are invited to meet the artist, attend dinner parties for patrons of the arts, and given preferential treatment in future sales. The establishing of friendships helps to remove the art even farther from categorization as a commodity. I was also interested in the seeming implications of the gallery space as an obsolete space in the realm of economic trade, which continues to exist merely for its value in the moderation of hostile worlds views and tradition. The author cites the economic aspects of galleries as "inefficient". Does anyone else hold this view as well?

Artists, collectors, dealers, and the like gather at a vernissage in Berlin.

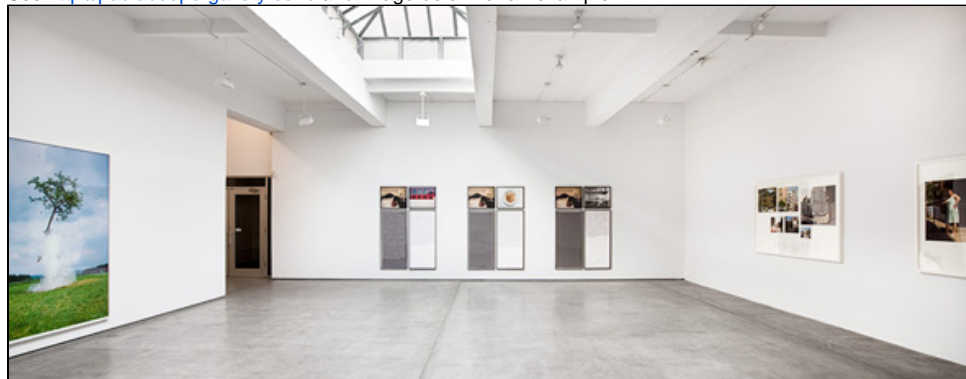
On the other hand, auction houses can be seen as the nemesis for people who believe that the indifferent nature of the sales transaction, and the ability of any one to buy the work if the price is right, takes away from the work. Galleries reserve the right to refuse the sale of art to anyone they believe could harm the future value of the work (both culturally and economically). Auction houses seem here to be less concerned with the symbolic value of the art, and more concerned with selling at premium prices. For them, any buyer will do. For galleries, museums are cited as the best place to situate a piece of art. Museums often maintain work for generations, if they ever sell at all. They also highlight the symbolic value of the art as a cultural cornerstone. Unfortunately when a museum sells work it can incite a scandal unless the museum can justify the sale for increasing its cultural significance with new acquisitions. Viki Sand, former chief executive of the Philly art museum was seen as saying that her institution "is not an art museum" after a major sale was made to fund renovations.

I am part of the moderate group who believes that art speculation can be damaging at times. I think that often assigning a monetary value to artistic merit is a necessary way to value art in terms that go beyond personal emotional and time values in a society that understands and appreciates a more universal language of trade. However, I do also acknowledge that damage can be done when one confuses price with value and begins to see these as the same things. This is particularly true for people who collect art solely for its monetary value, and who then totally devalue it as an aesthetic reality by storing it in a vault or warehouse, and not utilizing its "utility".

Dalanda Jalloh

Factors that support the architecture of the art market:

- - **The style of the art** (avant-garde or commercial galleries): avant-garde art galleries are located away from shopping districts, tourist hotspots, or other high-traffic areas. In other words, there is a separation between the art market and the wider economy. Commercial galleries tend to not steer away from the wider economy in the way the avant garde galleries do. Avant garde galleries are typically minimalist galleries. The gallery spaces are dimly lit and are characterized by an “expensive” feel. There is minimal decoration, the absence of furniture, and lighting of the gallery create an atmosphere that reinforces the autonomy of the artwork and displays the fact that it is separate from the noncommercial world of museums and the wider economy.
 - **The location of the art.** This location, along with the time of relocation of the gallery, is typically a source of prestige within the arts community. Avant garde galleries can typically be found in noncommercialized districts.
 - One art dealer by the name of Paula Cooper as being one of the first dealers on the SoHo scene in the early 1970s and one of the first in Chelsea, NY in the 1990s.
 - The willingness to move is sometimes viewed as adventurous and well-received by artists' peers, while the resistance to migration of one's art gallery has often been well-received with praise being bestowed upon the stubborn dealer trying to resist the trend in migration.
 - Depending on the nature of the dealer, different outcomes can result from their leadership of the gallery.
 - In running their galleries, these charismatic dealers present themselves as visionaries of the artistic field who are trying to make a name for themselves that will remain for the duration of time. “They say that they do not have an interest in selling what is economically viable in the present, but in what is of artistic importance in the future.” This definition of what is important to the dealer will dictate how they operate the gallery, which includes, where they locate the gallery so that they can make a name for themselves to forever remain in history.
 - **The desire to separate art from commerce.** This is often reflected through the separation of the front and back rooms of an art gallery.
 - **The front room:**
 - The front room of the gallery contains, depending on its size, one or more exhibition spaces. These spaces have concrete or wooden floors, bare white walls, no furniture, and bright lights, whose fixtures resemble those of construction sites. This minimal decoration creates the sense of separation and keeps the “commerce at bay”.
 - This type of structure can be found in places like Amsterdam and New York, but also in avant garde galleries located throughout the Western world.
 - Inside the front room, prices of art are usually not elucidated, and cash registers are typically absent.
 - See <http://paulacoopergallery.com/> and image below for an example:



- - **The back room:**
 - This room is “constructed as a commercial space” and is a region where “art and commerce are juxtaposed physically in architecture of the modern gallery”.
 - In small galleries the back room sometimes consists of only a single room or even a ‘niche’ of the gallery space.
 - In larger galleries, the back room can consist of multiple corridors of space, each with a unique function. The functions can include an office for directors and dealers, and a private viewing room, furnished with comfortable seats for potential buyers to view art comfortably.
 - “In general, the back room makes visible the permanent information streams which galleries both tap into and contribute to”. There is information about artwork, price lists of previous exhibitions, artists, and more, stored in archives.

Works Cited:

- Velthuis, Olav. *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.

Daniel Chazen

Velthuis makes a great sociological analysis of the front room – back room architectural dynamic of the art market. I've been in a few galleries in New York City and never even realized (until now) that there is even a backroom. Maybe I was naïve, maybe I didn't think about it as I am not involved in the art market, or maybe the galleries have it down to such a science that most people get so “caught up” in the artwork that it's something they don't even think about. But having read this piece by Velthuis, I think that when you look past a gallery's front room / back room set up, what's at play is not so much a study in sociology, but instead sophisticated marketing and an understanding of consumer behavior. That being said, I do agree that the architecture and economics of the contemporary art market is probably unlike any other market. For example, textbook supply and demand does not seem to set the price. On the contrary, there is an attempt to avoid a “hostile worlds” mixing of art and money because it could negatively affect art (Coslor 210). While that viewpoint is important in the architecture of the contemporary art market, I am focusing my response on the gallery space used for selling art as it's something I find very intriguing.

Velthuis' analysis of how galleries separate art and money through the front room / back room is insightful. The first thing that came to mind after reading his piece is how he initially talked about the apparent lack of initiative to gallery owners or directors to make a sale and their "anti-commercial self representations" (Velthuis 22). He basically suggests that by being non-commercial and having a "distinctiveness for his products" (Velthuis 23), the dealer can better market significant artwork to significant clients. The amazing thing here is that even though I believe it is all a show – a façade, the fact is that it works. It's so easy to get caught up in the austere gallery space and the art work on display, that one only thinks about money after he has become committed to buying a piece on display. What is absolutely amazing here is that I don't think there is anything else I can think of that people consider for purchase without knowing its price.

Can anyone here ever think of shopping for a car or a home without knowing what it costs?

Art dealers claim that it is more about the artwork itself rather than the money involved. Velthuis says that it is important to separate "art from commerce" (Velthuis 30). Many contemporary art dealers claim that they distribute art for their love of art, not for the money. Because of this, the dealers say they physically design their galleries as places for experimentation, vehicles for ideas, and places where art can flourish, instead of as a showcase for commodities (Velthuis 21). Although a gallery is essentially a retail store for art, it is purposely not designed that way. I find this all very intriguing because it's obvious that money plays a very important role in the art business; without it there wouldn't be an art market to begin with.

Inside the front room of the gallery, the focus is on the art and nothing else. The aesthetics of the gallery seems to be rather bland. The floors are wooden, instead of carpeted. The walls have no decoration, there is no furnishing, and the lights are bright halogens that "resemble those of construction sites" (Velthuis 31). There are no price tags or cash registers present. This is obviously designed to get the prospective customer "caught up" in the artwork. And the more caught up the customer gets in the work without knowing the price, the more likely I think he or she is to make a purchase. Had a big price tag been on front of the work, maybe the customer would have acted differently. It's a lot easier to fall in love with something when you aren't thinking about the price.

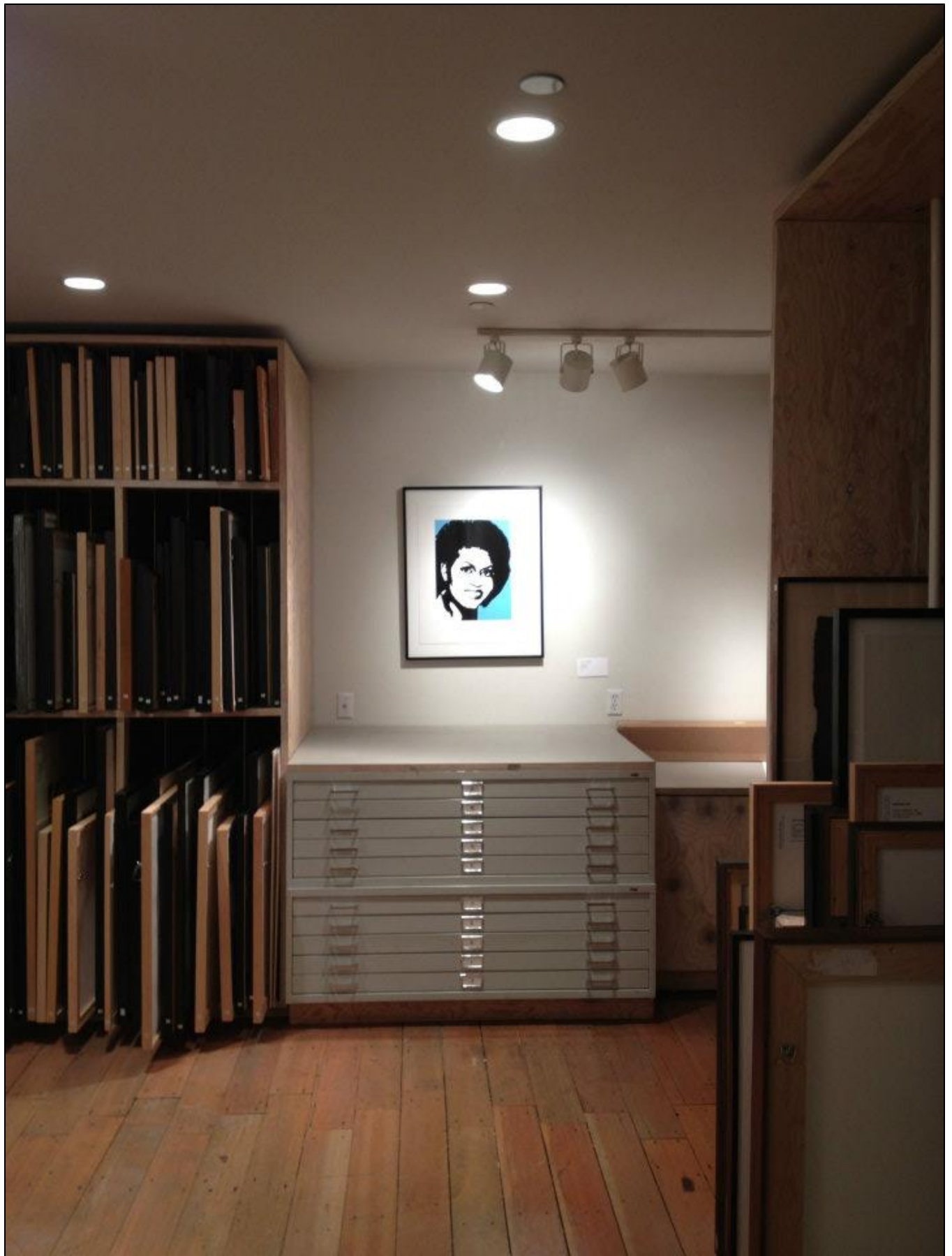
The back room, on the other hand, is where all the business transactions take place. "The back room is constructed as a commercial space; art and commerce are juxtaposed physically in the architecture of the modern gallery" (Velthuis 33). The back room is also purposely hidden from the main front room. Offices can be found in this back room, including inventory, price lists, and other paperwork. The back room makes the "information architecture of the market visible" (Velthuis 35). The back room is also used for secondary market sales, which usually involves special high priced artworks.

The best way to sum up the back room / front room architectural dynamic is that the modern day art gallery is a work of art in and of itself; not necessarily an artist's work of art, but the work of someone who I think understands consumer behavior and knows how to market a product. By the gallery not being forceful or obvious about a sale, the customer is probably more inclined to actually make a purchase. Once the customer, or his spouse, has fallen in love with a painting, it has to be easier for the gallery to make the sale.

Here is a picture of a front room at a gallery; you can hardly tell there is back room:



Here is a picture of a back room at a gallery:



Elena Cestero

The factors that support the architecture of the art market are many and complex. The value of art is determined by the relationship between culture and economics. Even the meaning of the value of a work is subject to interpretation depending on the relationships and understanding between the players (artists, dealers, galleries).

Although the theoretical ideas were interesting, they were much harder to concretely define and so the aspects of the physical differences between rooms and types of galleries are what attracted my attention the most. I was fascinated by the differences between the traditional and contemporary (or avant-garde) galleries in terms of their décor as well as their differing approaches to selling art.

The reading represents avant-garde versus traditional as being equivalent to taste with financial power versus financial power lacking taste. Surely this is not always the case but is a very interesting evaluation/judgment. The well lit, spare, bare floor minimalist style of contemporary galleries (at least in the front room), or "white cube" is a direct contrast to the dimly lit, furnished, and carpeted traditional galleries. Price is not displayed and money is not spoken of in the front room of the contemporary gallery while in the traditional gallery prices are often displayed and the overall experience is much more similar to other forms of retail. While it is impossible to separate art and commerce, contemporary galleries attempt to define a separation whether or not this is only symbolic.

Contemporary (avant-garde) gallery



Traditional gallery



The contrast between primary and secondary art selling is also very interesting. Primary sales are more respectable than secondary, and the art is expected to sell itself in a sort of waiting game whereas secondary employs a much more active style of marketing and selling. Pricing has become a ranking device for artist, and the economic value of a work is very dependent on cultural and social beliefs and interactions. Dealers seem not only interested in the monetary side (although many all together deny any interest in it at all), but also in shaping the history of art by supporting famous artists and their work and in turn gaining a long-lasting reputation and renown for themselves (like the patrons of Renaissance art commissions).

Although dealers, galleries, and artists may deny it, art is definitely a business. It is a business that is carried out in a manner perhaps unlike any other in the way that it combines influences, relationships, and other factors specific to it in order to shape the monetary, cultural, and symbolic values of art. There is much emphasis on buying art for the right reasons and sales being "good matches" between a work of art and a patron, but the purchase of art for whatever reason affects the current and future value and history of the work and all parties involved are acutely aware of this. Art and money are inextricably linked whether visibly or not.

H. Hunt Bradley, III

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June Shin

The "Hostile World" view says that the arts community's interaction with the capitalist world has negative effects. In this hostile world the economic and the artistic cannot fuse; the exploitative, profit-seeking dealers infect the art world, and the artist are alienated from their own works (Velthuis 25). The "Nothing But" view is a little more complex. William Gramp saw the Art market as nothing but a type of market like any other ordinary market. Pierre Bourdieu, on the other hand, believed that the apparent distance from commercialism produced by the people in the art market is nothing but a mask to create a sacred, special environment in which the actors can harvest more economic profit in the long run (Velthuis 28). Velthuis sees all these arguments as inadequate to describe the practices that take place in the art market. Instead he tries to combine all by venturing into a sociological analysis of prices; that is, to analyze prices in terms of the market that produced them. In the art market, an exchange is neither purely economic nor social but a combination of both. Such factors as power relations and social networks play a big part in the art market, more so than in other markets.

Dealers try to affect people's behavior through methods like the separation between the sacred and profane. It is an important one that manifests in the art galleries' location, architecture, and type under which they fall. First, most dealers avoid popular neighborhoods in which factors detracting from the sacredness of art are prevalent. So they choose quiet, rather secluded areas. The architecture of the avant-garde gallery is also very important. Most galleries have front rooms where artworks are displayed and back rooms where transactions take place. The physical distinction between the two spaces is critical in creating the right atmosphere and impression that the gallery is not about making money by selling but about showing great art. Also, galleries' invisibility from the outside and hallway leading into the exhibition space act as ways to disconnect the world of art from everyday life. The front rooms are uniformly and universally minimalist with white pristine walls and without decorations, which is why they are often called the "white cubes" (Velthuis 33). Because of the noncommercial environment and other factors that make the galleries detached from the "real world" outside the gallery doors, the normal economic laws do not work, allowing artworks that barely have any value to those outside of the art world to be sold at such high prices.

There is another distinction dealers have to make and that is one between primary and secondary transactions. The primary sales is a "waiting game" whereas the secondary sales is a "brokering game." The latter is obviously more commercial. While most dealers engage in both activities, many are more discreet about the latter, for its connection to financial goals and the implications it may bring, which can affect their primary sales. Therefore, the architecture of the art market seem to be made up of distinction dealers choose to make.



White Cube London

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Kelly Zona

The structure of the art market is a network of social and economic relationships linking art and value. This value can be aesthetic, cultural, monetary, or otherwise. These markets are divided into the primary and secondary markets, and each is defined by a complex web of unique relationships and rituals.

On a social level, the market structure is a network of relationships between artists, dealers, and buyers and collectors. Olav Velthuis defines the relationships between these parties as “circuits of commerce” (Velthuis, 5). Within these circuits, goods and services are subject to market and gift exchanges, or a combination of both. Members of these circuits can be motivated to exchange for status or love, among other things (Velthuis, 6). These circuits can be further broken down into the opposing “avant-garde” (high art) and “traditional” (commercial art) categories (Velthuis, 18).

The value for works of art is assigned rather than intrinsic (Coslor, 209). In order to understand how dealers set prices for works of art, one must understand how both cultural and symbolic values relate to monetary values. The relationship between the artist and dealer is of primary importance. It may resemble more of a family or friendship than a business relationship. Only when this relationship is firmly established will the artist and dealer begin to discuss their economic relationship. This can take three forms. The dealer can employ the artist to produce work, they can purchase work from the artist and resell it, or the artist can consign his work to a dealer and the profits are divided. When deciding how to set prices, dealers have a multitude of factors to take into account, which may include age and reputation of the artist, the technique and size of the artwork, and the affiliation and age of the gallery (Velthuis, 8).

Though not all exchanges focus on money. Many in the art world take the “hostile worlds” point of view, which essentially states that money corrupts integrity. These people often place the emphasis on “transcendental” or aesthetic values (Coslor, 22). In place of monetary exchanges, a symbolic and ritualized system of gift giving is used. For example, an artist can donate work to a dealer, and a dealer may subsidize an artist (Velthuis, 76). This is typical business etiquette of the primary market, which is highly ritualized. The transition of art from the studio to the gallery is also highly symbolic and ritualized. Receptions and celebrations of the artist’s career are important to downplay the commercial aspect of the move. Acquisitions are usually followed by toasts, again to transform an act of commerce into an act of celebration or ritual (Velthuis, 38). The etiquette of the secondary market is less restrictive and does not make as much of an attempt to mask commerce with ritual.

The architectural strategies of the art gallery reflect this network of relationships and the importance of symbolic value. First, galleries are categorized as either “avant-garde” or “traditional”. Avant-garde galleries are concerned with the “transcendental,” or nobler aspects of art, and try to convey a sense of austerity. They characteristically have clean, white interiors with little decoration. They are more like museums than shops. It is where receptions and socialization take place, and the space is therefore symbolically appropriate. The facade conveys the same message; it is usually very minimal and space, symbolizing the values of the establishment. Traditional galleries, on the other hand, are more concerned with the business side of art, and their interiors look more like shops. Their facades are often quite transparent, again resembling other commercial spaces.

The “avant garde” gallery is further divided into a front and back room, symbolic of its different relationships to the art market. The front room, white and austere, references the noble side of art and avoids reference to the commercial aspects of the market. The back room is where commerce takes place, and is treated in a more informal way (Velthuis, 33).

With the increasing influence of high end designs on commercial shops, I wonder if there will always remain a clear distinction between the avant-garde and traditional galleries. For example, the MOMA design shop, while not exactly a gallery, seems to provide a good example of the blurring between high end design and commercialization.

http://www.momastore.org/museum/moma/StoreCatalogDisplay_-1_10001_10451_

Khrystyne Wilson

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Kwame Nana-Ato

The economic disparity between the galleries and art dealer is quite interesting here. A gallery although holds and exhibits art, is a place where art is sold. To read that most galleries talk about not being interested in the monetary value of the works they exhibit is quite absurd. Why do galleries try to discard commercial interest when it is one the goals of the place. It is how new emerging artists make money as well gets into the public scene. From this point of view, the capitalist reduction of all values contrasts the concept of “Nothing But” model that ascribes monetary terms conflicts with art’s creation of autonomous, esthetic values. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion talk of “Nothing But” esthetic values veils a practice actually driven by ordinary economic motives. Velthuis finds that both views are incorrect, sbecause cultural concerns as well as strictly business-oriented interests regulate ordinary economic behavior itself.

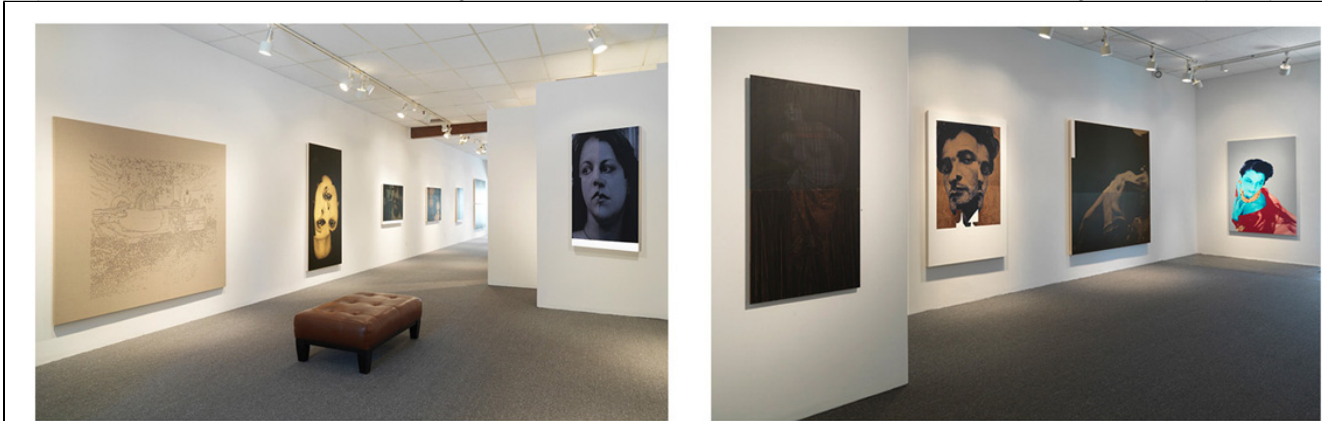
I find it hard to take the “hostile world” model as a bad thing. As an artist you have the choice to decide to sell your works or not, I do not see why an artist should not sell works anyway. People will always buy art, and it is impossible to be aware of the nature of people buying the works. It might be for whatever reason they want but while they decide on the purpose of what to do with an artists work, the artist is out there making money and making a name as well. That said, if the “hostile world” also consists of art dealers who are squeezing money out of artist who are desperate to exhibit their works, then it is something to talk about. The hostility should be geared towards art dealers rather than the people who buy art for whatever reason. The art dealers are supposed to be friends to the artist rather than this stereotype of being insensitive to the feelings of an artist

Dealers do not display the prices of their wares, because they present themselves as engaged not so much in a business as in a sort of cultural philanthropy; the relationship between dealers and their clients is not restricted to the exchange of cash for goods but also takes into account the social meanings with which objects are endowed. Pricing therefore involves speculation on the future significance of works, as well as the influence of current esthetic fashion, and prices are treated as themselves indicators of quality. I agree with Velthuis that by reducing multiple meanings of prices and the negotiated interaction between dealers, collectors, and artists to nothing but another instance of utility maximization, we do injustice to the complexity of these phenomena.



The back room of a Gallery in Seattle, Washington with tags which might be displaying informations about the price amongst other things.

While in Rome, I realized that it was very difficult to locate galleries, not only because they were small, but they were hidden in places no one will ever think of going to look at or buy art. The same happens to be seen here in New York. I don't know if separation of the front and back galleries is so that it can enhance the experience of people coming in to view the artworks, or has a psychological connotation to it. However, I believe that even though galleries sell art, they, to most lay people are also museums and so when people get there to look at art, they will not expect to see activities of sale going on. I don't know I am right by saying that from the way it has been structured, it looks like only people who know about art or the art market tend to look for the backroom. Front rooms have taken into this boxlike architecture form with plane white space and good lighting to evoke the sense of appreciating art in its purest form, that way galleries can defend their very long historic adage about not interested in the commercial aspect of art but more about the experience. Yet in the backroom, is where the dealings take place, the primary market and the secondary market. The primary market is the selling of works of artist on exhibit in the front room, while the secondary market is the sale of works by other prominent artist, maybe works by people who have once exhibited there. Sometimes galleries collect works of artists who have exhibited there in their storage and sell it upon request.



Clark Gallery, Boston

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McKenzie Sullivan

There are many factors that support the architecture of the art market. In particular, I was most fascinated by the concept of “Goffmanian Separation” which is the separation of the front and back rooms in contemporary art galleries.

Since the inception of the modern art market, art dealers have defined their own identity as promoters and patrons of art rather than merchants and marketers of art. Through the evolution of the concept of the contemporary gallery art dealers have steered away from commerce and consumerism, which they perceived would degrade and devalue the art. Art dealers began to strive for their galleries to be “places of experimentation” and “vehicles for ideas” where art could flourish. This aim at engaging “in a privileged dialogue with the artist” still exists today. The function of contemporary and avant-garde galleries is to provide people who understand art and who appreciate being engaged by it with the opportunity to see it, rather than to simply make money. The concept of these Galleries is to “work for the long term development of the artists career.”

One of my favorite revelations from Olav Velthuis’ study was: “The fact that art galleries are also supposed to sell art can only be read between the lines, if at all.” Art galleries strive so hard to be non-commercial and disassociate themselves with commerce that one almost forgets that the art hanging on the walls is for sale. I actually believe this art dealer marketing ploy as an obsession to promote the artists’ talents, rather than exploit their creations, goes so far that it may hinder the successful sale of the artists’ work. Many people walk in and out of galleries like a museum. They may not even realize that the gallery is trying so hard to prevent the works from coming into contact with money that they are selling to a very elite group of patrons, not the general public,

The concept of *Goffmanian Separation* is the most intricate symbolic attempt to separate art from commerce. It is the physical separation of the front and the back of the gallery. The front of the gallery contains, depending on its size, one or more exhibition spaces. Such spaces may have concrete or wooden floors (carpets are hardly ever used) white walls without ornamentation, no furnishing, and neon or bright halogen lights. The minimal decor and lighting create an atmosphere that reinforces the autonomy of the artwork on display and forces the commerce of transaction to be kept at bay. The loftiness of the process inculcates only aesthetes and those with deep pockets. There is literally nothing else to focus on but the art. This architecture is one of the many examples of the market’s isomorphism, as institutional sociologists have come to refer to it: the minimalist, austere architectural language of the world of museums versus the commercial world of luxury commodities.

The austere, sparsely-furnished spaces that have dominated the western art markets for at least half a century are white cubes. The term has now been coined to refer to such austere gallery spaces that strive to provide a neutral background for contemporary art. Galleries rarely deviate from this layout. Doing so would seriously compromise the legitimacy of a gallery within the prescription of what the art world markets itself as.



(Exhibition of Picasso: Mosqueteros' at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, New York, 2009)

The sharpest distinction is made between the front room of the gallery where the works are exhibited and commerce is suppressed and the back room, which is the commercial nerve center of the gallery. Inside the front room neither a cash register nor price tags are present. When a work has been sold it is not removed from the exhibition, but a small sticker may be put on a price list of the works that are being exhibited. In 1988 New York City decided to enforce the “truth-in-pricing” law for art galleries. The law stated that all galleries had to conspicuously display prices. Protests against the decision criticized that the law would turn galleries into retail stores. This law would bring the consciousness of money to the forefront of the galleries and that exposure of prices would get in the way of the visitor’s enjoyment of the exhibition. After violators refused to pay fines the government eventually dropped the issue. Typically today prices of very expensive artworks are only available on request

If the front, most visible and museum-like part of the gallery suppresses any reference to the commercial function of the gallery, the back room, by contrast, is constructed as a commercial space. Art and commerce are juxtaposed physically in the architecture of the modern gallery. For example, in the largest New York venues such as the Marlborough Gallery or the Wildenstein Gallery located in a corporate building on 57th street, the back of the gallery consists of several corridors of spaces with distinct functions. These spaces include offices for the directors or negotiating a sale and usually a private viewing room, furnished with comfortable seats, where potential buyers can look in full comfort at a small number of works they may be interested in.

By making an architectural distinction between the exhibition space known as the (noncommercial) primary thrust of the venue, from their (commercial) secondary marketing activities and by deploying two opposed sets of selling techniques, art dealers enact the *Durkheimian* separation of the “sacred and the profane.”



(Private Viewing Room, Opera Gallery, SoHo, New York)

Within the restriction of the white cube, dealers can construct and fortify their identity by means of their installation techniques and layout. Typically galleries are located away from shopping districts, tourist hotspots, or other high traffic area. When it comes to location, a separation is established between the art market and the wider economy. New York art galleries remain clustered in streets, neighborhoods (such as Chelsea). The post war movements of these clusters can be traced in time: on west upscale 57th street, where the market for contemporary art was centered in the 50's and 60's and in SoHo, where the art market moved from the mid 70's onwards, few galleries can still be found. Nowadays most of them are located in Chelsea. Some less commercial art galleries have been founded since the late 1990's in Williamsburg Brooklyn (where many artists actually live and work). At the time when galleries started moving to Brooklyn, both Chelsea and SoHo were by and large industrial neighborhoods. Although these neighborhoods have become gentrified, none of them had many retail stores or restaurants at the time that the first galleries started moving there. These collective migrations of art galleries are first and foremost propelled by the prices of real estate: when dealers were unable to afford the galleries they were renting or when they wanted to expand their exhibition spaces. They proceeded to be pulled towards new locations because of the lower rents. Some galleries have even claimed to move out of SoHo only because of the increased popularity of the neighborhood and the influx of tourism that they did not want to be associated with. The location of a gallery or the timing of its relocation is in itself a source of prestige within the arts community. These moves speak of an independent attitude that is exclusively appreciated by the arts community. Similarly, galleries that refused to migrate have been praised for their stubbornness and their willingness to resist the trend.

Along with location, there is another pattern that many contemporary galleries follow. Almost invariably, a shop window to the gallery is absent. It is typically impossible to view the inside of the gallery from the outside because of the use of opaque frosted window glass or because of thin curtains behind the windows. Some galleries only display their name in small letters next to the entrance door. For smaller galleries this entrance door gives access to the main exhibition space, while visitors to larger galleries need to pass through a small hall or corridor before accessing the exhibition as Velthuis point out, this hall serves to disconnect the world of art from everyday life. It is these important aesthetic and architectural factors that successfully allows galleries to separate art and commerce through the physical separation of front and back rooms, which in turn support the architecture of the art market.

Nicholas Krislov

The dealer-artist model of galleries straddling the line between ambassador to culture and commodities seller is extremely prevalent in the current art market. Art dealers by definition sell art to customers. However, their role as many see it is to bring culture to the population via collectors and exhibitions. It is important for the dealer to maintain an attitude of cultural sensitivity as well as a business which puts culture over currency(or at least appears to). The idea of pricing out paintings is a bit of a taboo in the art world. Because one of the purposes of art is to evoke emotion, feeling and mimic the defining features of art, it is difficult to price. How can one put a price on the feeling of childhood, or the horror of death. Dealers try to bridge the gap between sales and cultural ambassador, to both help the artist sell their work, and the buyer own a cultural experience.

It is often difficult to remain culturally sensitive while maintaining a business. Galleries in New York often move because areas become more or less fashionable. New York's SoHo was a hot spot for galleries in the 1970's due to its low rents and industrial feel. When major shopping labels began moving into SoHo in the 1990's, galleries moved elsewhere, such as Chelsea and Brooklyn to maintain an artistic integrity.

Maintaining artistic integrity is one of the major aspects of the galleries which differentiates themselves from regular shops and sellers. The Front Room is a perfect example of how galleries engineer an environment of culture. The Front Room is a mix between a car sales room and a museum. The floors are often wood or cement, and the lighting perfectly focuses the attention on the pieces. The art work is the sole fixture of the walls, and prices are rarely ever seen or mentioned. The lack of price labeling helps communicate to the public that the gallery is not a place of business, but a cultural experience. There are no cash registers- showing again a difference in business. Even after New York law pushed dealers to reveal prices for artwork to avoid snobbery and asymmetric information, dealers still try their best to hide prices by stating "the item is yet to be priced". The Front Room is a place of elegance, and not sales. Even when a piece has been sold, it is not immediately removed because the gallery is still used for free exhibition to the general public. A perfect example of a Front Room is the Stricoff Gallery in Chelsea, pictured below. .

Ultimately, the Front Room experience shows the delicate balance between art and commodities. Galleries maintain an aura of cultural significance while subtly sell artwork benefits the artist and the customer. The difficulty in pricing and maintaining a liquid market for art is due to the fact that dealers try to differentiate the Art Market from any other market. Other markets have homogenous products, however the Art Market offers products which evoke feelings which affect everyone differently. These one of a kind products are difficult to sell, but creating an environment of cultural sensitivity maintains the artists' aims.

Tadd Phillips

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