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"The Return of the 90s. The Art Market in Times of Crisis"

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Well thanks to Jason Kakoyiannis and Howie Chen for these generous introductions. Thanks to Columbia University, the Center on Organization Innovation and especially David Stark for finding me here.

I guess I want to start with a warning. I look at the art world or at the art market as an anthropologist. I look at you as a tribe who has their rituals, their symbols, all kinds of peculiarities, who tell stories to each other in order to make sense of the world. So it's an anthropological approach, an ethnographic approach that I am providing to you. Partially it's based on the book that I published a couple of years ago that Jason talked about how [art] prices are set. So it's based on a lot of interviews with art dealers, artists, collectors, with – just hanging around trying to immerse myself. But after having done this, after trying to come up with such an ethnographic account of a tribe that is called the art world, a confrontation with a tribe has always been difficult because on the one hand if the account that I am going to present to you now – if you like it, if you recognize it, if you see yourself represented here – I might have a feeling that I did something wrong. I might get the feeling that I was too superficial; that I did nothing more than just writing up what you guys were saying – that I'm not much more than a kind of biographer of your lives. So I would be dissatisfied. On the other hand, if my account manages to go beyond that, to go beyond what you tell in your symbols, your rituals, stories you tell to each other, and if I manage to provide a deeper account or a deeper meaning structure, the problem is that you will not recognize it and you will be dissatisfied. So that's the warning.

Either party – either me or you will not like the talk, or will not like how it will be perceived. Now with that warning, what I want to do is try to make sense of the current situation of the art markets. And in doing so, I intend with the current situation, the situation basically, the situation that started on Wednesday, September the 17<sup>th</sup> of 2008, two days after Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, one day after Damien Hirst managed to sell two hundred million dollars worth of art at Sotheby's in London. That was the last day of the boom era of the art market. The next day on Wednesday the recession began.

Now I'm not going to go into this one million dollar question of if we've seen the bottom of the recession yet – the question that seems to preoccupy almost everybody here at the fairs – that the media are writing about. Although, I cannot resist saying something about it. But it will be short. I'm not going to say something like the financial type – will it be a U-shaped recession or a W-shaped recession where we come back up and then go back down again or like the terrible L-shaped Japanese recession that just continues for years and years and years.

But I am a bit worried about all the optimism that you see all of the sudden around the art world inspired by sales that seem to be going quite strong now at the Armory show, of course the auction sales of the last couple of weeks, the one hundred million dollar Giacometti sculpture that was sold. Sotheby's last week reported its largest quarterly profit in eighteen months. The number of people that show up at the art fairs – it all seems to be signs of a recovery, of a recession that has already passed. I don't know. Just to show you some recent numbers, just to get a bit of a statistical view of what the art market is about now, these are numbers that were just published last week in a report by the TEFAF. The annual turnover last year of the global art market decreased twenty-five percent. Now the author of the report, paid by TEFAF, not fairly surprisingly concluded that we almost must be at the bottom. But then if you look at the graphs of what this boom was like and what the bust was like, I think it's fairly hard to claim that we're there yet.

Here you see a price index for the last twenty-five years of contemporary art prices at auctions. You see from 2006 onwards, the blue and red peak at the very end, how amazing this boom has been for the art markets. I mean, compare it to the stock market or compare it to the housing market; they were really nothing compared to what was going on with the art markets. Or even compare it to the boom in the 1980's – it's the middle line up here. It's just a very small blip compared to the boom of 2006, 2007, 2008. You also see that the bust was enormous, but I think it's very hard to claim that this line that is just nose-diving down that all of the sudden this is coming to a standstill and all of the sudden it's just hitting the bottom. I don't think it's very likely. By the way, you should draw your own conclusions, but I would warn you not to pay too much attention to what the art dealers themselves say.

In days of recessions, to me art dealers are just like bankers. Don't trust them. I mean, they would never of course say how it's going. Like bankers, they are haunted by the idea of the self-

fulfilling prophecy. So if they would be saying it's going bad of course it will be going bad. So don't trust them – however you make up your minds about it. Anyway, that was just a small aside. What I would like to focus on though is not so much what is really going on (if we've hit the bottom), but more how art dealers in these days are making sense of what the market is about, where the market is going, if this recovery is permanent or not.

And my claim is that the way they do that is in terms of “the Other”, in terms of another period that they contrast it with. If you talk to dealers now about how the current market situation is affecting them, all of them will start making comparisons with the decade that just ended on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, 2008. And the claim is – and I find it interesting – is that it is not all that bad that we landed, that we ended up in this recession. There might be less money floating around, but at least the culture of the markets is becoming better. They are talking about the current days as a kind of a purification. They are using words like, “Isn't it great that now finally the speculators are dropping out?” ... I have serious doubts about it, but at least that's how they are making sense, how they are kind of rationalizing the current period. And what is striking about this is how similar it is to the rhetoric, to the discourse, to the metaphors they were using in the 90's.

For this book that I wrote I did most of my interviews and my ethnographic work in the 90's and when I started doing interviews again last year I was just amazed by how similar they were talking. I was almost thinking I might as well just stop doing my interviews because I can just use the old material again to make a picture of the current situation. Now with the 90's, of course they were referring, to “the Other” as the 80's – the boom years of the 80's as against the sober years, the shakeout, the purification of the 90's. Now it's the decade of the 2000's, the first decade as against the current situation that started on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September of 2008. It is this homology, this dialectical relationship between now and the 2000's on the one end and the 1990's and the 1980's that I want to understand a bit better. I'm going to do that with this kind of schematic account that I'm sure looks a bit overwhelming at first sight.

Maybe it looks a bit like homework that we'll have to get through, and I'm afraid we'll have to get through it. But before I'll discuss what I'm writing on this table I want to say a couple things about it. Again, this is not a truthful picture. It's not about the truth here. It's about sense-making: sense-making metaphors, sense-making words, sense-making stories that dealers tell to each other, tell to their artists, tell to collectors. It's also of course not as monolithic as it seems here

on such a table. It is not like everything in the 1980's and the 2000's was about a "superstar" narrative or everything in the 1990's and today is in a "prudent" narrative. But their stories are quite monolithic indeed. You can think of a lot of artists, dealers, collectors that don't fit into this table very well, but it does give a bit of a picture of how they make sense.

There are also differences between the decades that I'm now conflating – so I'm conflating the 80's and the 2000's on the one end and the 90's and the current days on the one end. Of course there are major differences between all these eras. Just to mention a couple: we live in a far more globalized art market now than we were in the 80's and the 90's; the internet has a major impact on art markets now which it didn't have yet two decades before; and of course there is the rise of art fairs. I mean, it's hard to imagine for us now, but in the 80's the art fairs didn't play a role whatsoever in how the markets function. Now the 80's and the 2000's were characterized by what I call a "superstar" narrative. These were days that were about the artist as a superstar, the artist rising to fame, the artist or small group of artists claiming all attention, being in the spotlight, being exponents of, as economist Robert Frank called it, "A winner-take-all society" – a small group of artists that claimed all the attention. As against the narrative that art dealers and collectors use now, of a "prudent" narrative, a narrative in which we do business the prudent way; we don't want to be in the spotlight, we don't want to claim all the attention. To understand these decades better I need the help of a French sociologist that I hope to share ya picture of. There he is, Pierre Bourdieu, who died seven years ago and whose writing on art worlds has influenced my thinking to an enormous extent. Now Bourdieu thinks of society as being composed of several fields, among which a field of cultural production, a field that we call the art world. And every field is characterized, according to him, by habitus, a way of acting, a way of doing, a way of speaking, a whole set of dispositions, as he calls it– even our clothing styles, the way we dress up. In order to perform, to function in the art world you have to fit in to that habitus. This field of cultural production is also being characterized by a specific set of, by a specific form of capital. In mobile markets it is legitimate for firms, for actors to be interested in profit. Not so in the art world. The type of capital that is legitimate is symbolic capital. What we try to accumulate in the art world is reputation; symbolic capital meaning the power to create value, the power to say this is an important art piece and that is not, this is a promising artist and that is not. According to Bourdieu, those are not properties of art works themselves. It's not that there is necessarily good and bad art. It is a property of people that have the power– that have the symbolic capital to say this is a good work of art and this isn't. Now that's the type of capital that is legitimate. How do you accumulate this? How does a critic, or an art dealer, or an

artist, or a curator, how does he accumulate symbolic capital? How does he get that power to say this is good art? One of the ways he does that is by denying that economics, that economic interests are at stake, by denying that there is a money interest there, by denying that he might want to make a profit as a dealer, by denying that he wants to make a good living by writing art criticism or by being a curator. And that is very much the capital that is dominant nowadays. It is not the capital though that was dominant in the 80's or in the 2000's. Then, in those days, it was other forms of capital. It was economic capital. Dealers were more interested— at least that's what they're saying with hindsight— in making a profit. And that was illegitimate. So they're talking in very pejorative terms about these previous eras. Those are also decades in which the art market, according to them, was very much about another form of capital: cultural capital, that is, status. For instance, these hedge funds managers that were all of the sudden developing interest in contemporary art. Now in the media that is always interpreted as hedge funds that were just expanding their portfolios, trying to hedge the financial assets against another asset, an alternative asset class, namely art. I don't buy into that interpretation. I think what those hedge fund managers and other wall street people were interested in when they were buying art was much more cultural capital— status. They were looking for something that the financial markets were not able to give to them, were not able to provide to them: cultural capital. So there is an opposition between these decades in terms of the type of capital that is dominant. There is an opposition in terms of market practices. The 1980's and the 2000's were decades that were about creating a hype— hyping up an artist, trying create to a buzz— or doing business in a fairly anonymous way. When I was talking to [inaudible] in Berlin in the fall, almost all of them, when I asked them about the previous decades, almost all the dealers were starting to talk about this practice of selling from jpegs; selling to collectors that they hardly ever had seen in life, that were just sending them requests by email about how much that piece that was on the website or on artnet.com— how much they were willing to sell it for. And now they were kind of regretting that they had participated in this practice. Instead, they were saying, now in the recession, you know what's good about it is that we have to go back to the interactions with the collectors. We have to create a firm market. We have to work for the artists again. We have to talk to the collectors, seduce them, tell them what the work is about. So in that sense it's an improvement compared to this anonymous, more economically oriented practice of selling from jpegs. The decades are contrasting in terms of the type of prices that are being set. In the 2000's it was a very aggressive strategy, they said. When a show would be sold out they would immediately double, or even in New York, triple the prices. And now instead they are talking about “back-to-basics” pricing. And I guess what's important here is that, for me, the way prices

are set is also, it's again part of what this culture is, what this tribe of the art market is about. These are not rational economic men thinking very deliberately, very rationally about how a price should be set. Instead, I see our dealers more using what I call "pricing scripts." Like in a Hollywood script, they have a script which tells them in which events, which type of price they have to set. And what September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008, did was it changed the script. It changed the script from an aggressive script into a back-to-basics consolidating script in which you don't want to increase the prices unless, for a number of shows consecutively, artists have shown that the market is strong, that the market is solid. You can even see the contrast between these two decades in terms of gallery districts. For me, districts are not geographical spaces where galleries are located, they are also symbolic spaces that tell you something about how the market is operating. SoHo came to symbolize the superstar decade of the 1980's. Chelsea in the 1990's, in the beginning with the first galleries such as Paula Cooper were moving here and it was still a big mess and there were only the taxi companies and meat shops and you name it were here, Chelsea then still considered to be a place where you would go in order to accumulate your symbolic capital, where you could increase, strengthen your reputation by locating yourself there. Now that role is being played much more on the Lower East Side and Chelsea, just like any symbol can get a different meaning, Chelsea got a different meaning as well; from a kind of avant-garde district into a commercial district where you don't, you're not sure if you really want to stay there. You can characterize the eras in terms of who the representative characters are. And I guess in the 2000's and in the 80's, the character was a celebrity, the superstar, the person that wants to be in the spotlight like here, Dennis Hopper and Julian Schnabel at some art event or, and I'm sorry about that, for Gwyneth Paltrow, for equating her with Dennis Hopper— but Paltrow here at Freeze in London where she would always show up at the openings. That would be symbolic for this era, for this superstar era— the celebrities being part of the art market. And of course the global collectors, this newly rich class from the BRIC countries, from Brazil, Russia, India, and China. And now after September 17<sup>th</sup> dealers are all of the sudden saying, "I'm not too disappointed that all of those collectors have withdrawn." Here's a quote by a Berlin, a prestigious Berlin art dealer who's saying, you know "The new collectors from Russia, they are often very unsure, they see things and they like it, but they have no idea what it means, where to place it. They always need people helping them. They are learning quickly but they are also shy and unsure sometimes. (...) When the Western market became very slow, they even felt more unsure of what was going on ...." They withdrew and nobody has to feel sorry for them. So the new type of collector that they're talking about, that they're cherishing, is actually the old collector. It's the collector that was in the background

in the last years, that was not coming to the fairs anymore because he didn't feel at ease among all the celebrities, the collector, as they say it, that is looking with his eyes and is not so much looking with his wallet. I saw this quote in, I think in the New York Times today, or maybe it was some other art-reporting site, that the collectors were again coming back with their notebooks and they were taking pictures of the works again to study them at home, to think about it. Again, I'm not saying it's true, but I am saying this is how the dealers make sense of it. It's also, and here I am using some anthropological terms by an anthropologist [inaudible] it's also the two eras contrast[ed] in terms of the way art was commodified, and what type of art was commodified. Now in the 1980's and 2000's the market was all about easily commodifiable art, not necessarily paintings or photographs that you can put on a nail on the wall, but at least things that are easy to market. You can even think about it in terms of really "boom" art, that boom theorists have a different type of art. Think of, also just very simply, artworks that are expensive to produce. Think of Jeff Koons' work. That for me is kind of representative, symbolic of a boom era. You need to have money, a lot of money floating around to even produce it because it's so costly. Against that, there is the much more difficult to commodify art that is being presented— also here [gestures to venue] at a place like the Independent— the installations, video art, that is more symbolic of the 1990's, when all of the sudden you saw a lot of galleries taking an interest in video art again. And of course there is a lot of opportunism there. There isn't that much money floating around so you might as well invest in your symbolic capital. If economic capital is scarce you might as well focus on the symbolic capital. So I'm not saying they are doing this as selfless people; of course there is an interest behind all of this. But that is not, and to put it in Bourdieu's terms, that is a type of interest that has to be denied. You can think of it in terms of works of art entering and exiting a commodity phase. And I'm using these terms also to understand much better what commodification, what that really is about. I guess, especially in the humanities, and also by art critics, the art market is always being equated with commodification. As a type of an either/or process, and if an artwork is being commodified, then [inaudible] the artist get[s] alienated, the quality of the work deteriorates, art markets conflate with financial markets, so there is this whole set of negative failures. But what I try to do is kind of unpack what this commodification is really about. So for me the question is not so much if a work of art is being commodified, but much more how that is being done. And these terms like "commodity candidacy"— what type of works of art are we commodifying? How often do we do this? How often do we put them on the spot? How often do we put them on the market spot? That is much more important to think about than just commodification as an idea or process. And what you see that— is that is in the 90's at least within these stories that dealers

tell, commodification is a very rapid process. Works of art are [pumps fists] coming in and out of this commodity phase very rapidly. They're being sold in the gallery and hey! All of the sudden, a year later, you see it popping up at [an] auction again. And they've been bought at auction and a couple of years later they come there again because a collector, a speculator, thinks he can make a profit. So that is kind of symbolic of the 1980's and 2000's eras: these rapid movements [pumps fists] in and out of the commodity phase. Whereas now, there's [sic] movements, at least according to the dealers, much slower. They prefer, actually, that a work of art is being commodified only once. They take it out of the artist's studio, put it in their gallery space, they sell it to a collector and they hope that it will never come on the market again— that it became, so to say, a “terminal commodity”, that it's life as a commodity dies. And finally, you can see the decades opposed in terms of the commodity context, the types of places, the types of spaces that are considered appropriate for a work of art to be bought and sold. Now in the 90's, 80's, and 2000's I guess the dominant contexts were the auction house, that were becoming more and more aggressive in trying to market contemporary art, and of course the art fair. Now I'm not saying that the role of art fairs died out but what I find interesting is that all of the sudden there is this rhetoric of returning to the home base. We've got these dealers now all of the sudden talking very negatively about fairs. And here's a quote by, again the Berlin dealer, who's saying, [reading from screen] “I don't like the fairs. I do fairs because I have to. And I have to because you make a very high percentage of the turnover at fairs. The last five years the fairs turned into something really gross...Overnight Frieze”— [interjects] because that is exemplary for him for this trend of fairs becoming so gross. [back to quote] “Overnight Frieze was about making money. Overnight it was about attracting more people. Overnight it was about catering the interests of the wealthy, really well known galleries, rather than looking at the next generation. Plus Frieze art fair is about seeing celebrities. I love seeing celebrities, but you don't do an art fair for that. It's not that satisfying. Only the first time.” So what they were saying is we have to attract those collectors to the gallery space. And the fairs, you cannot really talk well about the work, you cannot really show it well, you cannot have time to talk to your collectors. It's, in that sense, not an optimum place to show the market art. It's not an appropriate context to commodify it. So in Berlin, for instance, they came up with this alternative three years ago of the gallery weekend, where all the dealers would have their openings together and they would join the organized— all kinds of events, just like New York is doing now with this Armory Show week. And so one of them would say the gallery weekend was also a way to say this is where the work is and this is in the gallery. This is the place you really have to go if you want to know more about what we're doing. It's also that an art fair doesn't really [inaudible] communication.

Either it is extremely stressed because there is a lot of people or you don't have any privacy, you don't have the right tools you need to get in to something, you might go back and forth to show some more. It is very different. Actually this type of rhetoric, this pejorative rhetoric about the fairs— I think you can also see it in events like here [at] Independent. [shuffling through notes] I plan to read from paper but I didn't so I have to look for a second where I am. Yeah, so this rhetoric here at Independent, what I find interesting was the text here at the entrance where the organizers, the dealers were saying this is kind of a re-examination of the fair model. It's a dynamic conversation. By the way, that's about accumulating symbolic capital— those types of terms— re-examination of the model, dynamic conversation. And it was also stating very honestly that it is by financial efficiency. I guess they mean it's just cheap. But for me, what is interesting, it is that it is not just about financial efficiency, it's also about commercial unattractiveness. What Independent here is doing is providing an alternative to the fair also in terms of what this commodity context looks like. I mean look up here compared to the ordinary traditional art fair. Here it's without the white walls. Here you cannot even see clearly where one art dealer space ends, where the other begins. It just seems to be kind of incorporative space. Of course there's also still a bit of the atmosphere and the aura of the DIA Foundation hanging around the works that are being presented that are much more experimental. So for me, that is also symbolic for this current era, for this era, this recessional era. [to Howie] Is this a sidenote? Ok. For this recessional era that we're in. Now with this argument I do have a bit of a problem because, of course, art fairs are still expanding. We have many more fairs now in New York than we had last year. So in that sense my argument just doesn't work, It's better that I admit it myself than that you will ask a question about it afterwards. And I have to say I'm quite amazed how these numbers of fairs are still expanding. I think it's very counterintuitive. I also don't think it's, I don't think it's very sustainable. I mean these fairs, they were established in the past to kind of economize and search costs. To enable collectors with their high, as an economist would call it, high opportunity costs— that is, for every hour they spend at the fairs they cannot earn, I don't know, how many dollars per hour they earn at their regular jobs. So it's very costly for them to come to the gallery show. And if you put all the galleries together, well you help them economize on their search costs in finding the art they want to acquire. In sociological terms, the art fair is also, in [an] extremely good way, to establish these power hierarchies that which I was interested. And that is power hierarchies, on the one end, between the art world and the rest of society because here you can just show in a collective way with all these people gathering who is high on the status ladder and who is not. And you can do the same thing within the art world. I mean, of course fairs and the way they are designed with all these exclusive openings and pre-

pre- openings and all kinds of events and parties that some have some have access to and others are excluded from. They are sophisticated tools for establishing social hierarchies within the art world. But what is happening now with all these fairs around, and everybody all of the sudden being invited to some kind of pre-opening and some kind of after-party or some kind of fair that is taking place simultaneously in New York. It doesn't work that well in the search costs because you're, if you want to see all of it, you spent, I think it was counted somewhere in these journalistic pieces that I saw in the last days, that if you spend five minutes in every booth in all the fairs in New York this week it would take you sixty four full hours to see every booth, and that's just five minutes per both. So as a friend of mine was saying yesterday it's kind of like the tragedy of the commons. All these eighteenth century farmers that had all their common farmland for their cows and were having their cows graze so much on that common farmland that at the end all the farmland was getting ruined. I think what is happening with this, with this just proliferation of fairs is very similar; it's also a tragedy of the commons. Everybody is trying to claim some stake in this week. Everybody is trying to claim a little bit of the attention of the collectors, curators, and all the rest of the art crowd around. But because everybody's trying it nobody is really managing anymore. So it's kind of a collective action problem. And I don't think it's sustainable the way it is right now. In Europe, you already see that the smaller art fairs are not doing that well; some had to close down. I wouldn't be surprised if that will happen as well here. Now let me round off. I guess you could say that my story is just a simple story that you see in any market of booms being followed by busts, being followed by booms, being followed by busts, etc. In a way it is, but I think it is more than that. As I said just now, it's also a story of how dealers in times of high uncertainty try to make sense of the worlds they are living in— of the rapidly changing worlds they are living in. In doing so, they are driven by opportunism, but also they are really, as I said, they are driven by uncertainty; they are driven by a need to understand what kind of markets they are working in. It is not just about sense-making though; it also has an impact on how the art world is functioning. My story is in the end not just a story about this tribe— not just me being an ethnographer, trying to understand what you try to be doing— it does have real repercussions. 'Cause what I'm kind of puzzled by is what the response to the crisis has been. And in my view, there basically has not been any response at all. There hasn't been any change of business models. There hasn't been any kind of consolidation process. I mean, what you might have expected as an economist, at least, is that dealers would have merged. You just put together the best part of your dealerships and try to survive by combing your best artists, your best art. There's nothing like that going on. You do see it a bit in the auctions. They've been much more rapid in adapting their strategies to the changing market circumstances. They

became very involved with doing private deals. They're not doing just the public auctions anymore but they are, in a way, trying to become dealers. And of course the art dealers hate it. And I understand that hatred, but at the same time I'm kind of puzzled why they don't change their response themselves, why they are just passively looking at the auction houses taking away their market share. And I think one of the answers to why they are not doing it is that they're kind of being caught up themselves in these symbolic models. They're so concerned about being legitimate; they're so concerned with accumulating symbolic capital that a more, as you might call it, business-oriented response has just not been there. So there is a story I've been telling, but I do think real ramifications. Let's leave it there.

[applause]

Howie: So I think before we turn it over to the crowd for some questions and answers I think we're going to field— we're going to ask Olav a few questions as a follow-up, just as a starter for the conversation.

Jason: Well I've asked this question before, but I think it's worth the reprise. I'd like you to describe for a few moments who the audience is for your work initially was and how it's disseminated, and how its reception has unfolded.

Olav: Well, the answer would be I don't know. You should ask the audience. I could speculate. I've been surprised by quite a few art historians have read it and I didn't expect that at all. I mean the book is obviously written for an academic audience instead— and a sociological audience. It's a social science book. But I've been surprised by artists and art historians reading it and, yeah, I guess, I mean I imagined they wouldn't like it. It's never nice to read a book that is, for instance, saying it's about power what you are doing, but I guess it's been more favorable in art historian circles than I imagined. Where it has been not so favorable is I guess among economists. They think it's, just in general, talking to people you're doing research about, they think is just a very strange strategy. I think it's very strange not to do so, but an economist, they would just, they would model it. They would try to get some model to predict where prices or markets are going, so they don't, I guess in general they don't like the book very much. But why, I am also interested, why are you asking?

Jason: Well because I imagine that some audiences, they would say we know what you just told us. It's just never been consolidated in a book, but intuitively, in order to practice what we practice to be in this tribe, we have intuited these, the information. And what you've done is you've skillfully observed it, you've consolidated it and narrated it, and you've probably made it make more sense than it does, because it's shot through with all sorts of contradictions. And the motivations aren't really clear; they're improvised. And so then that begs the question, what is its use value? What would the intended audience do with this kind of information? And I want to just sort of pair that with— and I'm not going to let you off the hook because I know that in addition to being a sociologist you have an art history background, so you're familiar with the narratives we spoke of before within art history, within art making where there's a critical mandate [of] art making, or one narrative— several narratives of art making require that there be some kind of, that the art work or art maker somehow reflect successfully on the conditions of its exchange and that that critical awareness marks its, in some ways its sophistication.

Olav: Yeah well I guess I've been irritated when I studied art history that you don't get anything about commercial aspects at all or if you do it is from a Marxist perspective so it is, it would be these, I don't know, this whole Marxist tradition, whether in the old form or in the postmodern jacket— that would be the only commercial aspects of art worlds function and I found it very dissatisfying. I mean for artists, [long pause] I mean, I guess I would hope that they would find it a bit easier to think about their artistic practices and to think about dealer-artist relationships. For me, they are very much like roles being played and I think the dealer's role is often, is a roll that is, they claim to be like the, almost like the, to have like a father role for their artists— to have a supportive role, which to me is also like a condescending role and I guess if it leads to some kind of just reflection on that I would be very happy but it's very hard for an author to know how your work is being received. I mean it's, you just don't know.

Howie: The other question I would like to ask before we turn it over is— we heard a lot about dealers, we heard a lot about collectors and I think it would be interesting to talk about artists and how in the logic of celebrity, the celebrity logic, is there any chance for— what is the position of the artist in this logic? Is there fairness or even equal distribution of whatever? Is that even a possibility or there's no horizon for that?

Olav: [laughs] Well, yes and no. I mean on the one hand if you look at how like for instance when it comes to prices how they—also artists—try to justify prices—especially how artists try to

justify prices— it is very much equity. So an artist would say this piece is worth so much because I put so much labor in[to] it. So they basically have a, in essence, a Marxist type of labor theory of value, of how prices are being established. “I am entitled to this price because I put this number of hours into it and for every number, for every hour this would be a fair compensation so I’m entitled to that. The problem is of course if you, if that’s how you compute prices you arrive at numbers that, according to dealers at least, are just completely unsustainable, that you could never ask. So in that sense equity is invoked but it’s not being materialized on the market. When it comes to the superstar phenomenon, to this unequal distribution, to this winner-take-all situation, I don’t see much room for a change there. I mean it’s been around forever. You see this winner-take-all situation already— also for instance in the nineteenth century art markets, so when the modern art market was being established. I don’t see much room for space there. So the superstar phenomenon— it becomes stronger, it symbolizes some periods, it becomes weaker in others, but there is always this winner-take-all phenomenon. And I honestly don’t see— I mean you would completely have to reconfigure the art market in order for that to change, so I’m not too optimistic there.

Jason: [interrupting] Just something to add is that, if I remember correctly, an economist tries to characterize winner-take-all markets as being, as being characterized by chronic oversupply and chronic underemployment. So [laughs] that being the case, it’s interesting to me that the extent to which critical art practice, which has also been around for as long as the winner-take-all economy has existed, has been seemingly so unsuccessful in guiding things toward some kind of different distribution or at least distending a broader awareness—

Olav: [interrupting] Well yeah it’s the last part. I mean of course there have been plenty of artists that have come up with alternatives, that have made work about alternative models, but it doesn’t mean that on a macro scale it has changed art worlds or art markets and I don’t see that happening in the near future at all. I mean you would really have to have a completely different institutional configuration of art worlds in order for that. Now how art worlds are institutionally organized, it’s just inevitable that you have these winner-take-all situations.

Howie: So perhaps we, based on that response, we should field some questions from the audience— maybe a response of the idea of the totalizing logic of the celebrity or the agency of the artist. [gestures toward audience member] Go ahead. I’ll repeat the questions since our microphones are stuck up here.

Audience member #1: Yeah [inaudible]...that type of economy is actually in play [Olav nods “Uh huh] and I think it’s remarkable you know that the economy of symbolic value [inaudible] capital value where all, everybody is the winner and everybody can take all. And this is actually an economy that’s in action, where, in a huge way, the vendors at these art fairs and the economists, they were absolutely framed and backwards. [Olav nods “Sure. Yeah.”] I mean what I find amazing, and I really enjoyed your talk, but I find it amazing in the talk that the only way the Internet was referred to was as a way of pitching pictures through jpegs, but in fact it’s been the most revolutionary, radical, empowering distribution, upending distribution, thing that’s happened of our time. And quite frankly, that the art world [inaudible] in a weird way feels like it hasn’t discovered the Internet. So I was wondering if you could speak about those economies and why couldn’t this be a model for where this thing could go next. ‘Cause looking back, you know, look what’s happening around us.

Howie: Did anybody hear that? Ok the question was basically for Olav to comment on the Internet as a possible Other that was excluded from his talk.

Olav: Well I guess you have to distinguish the Internet as a production, as a means of production, or as a, where it’s being produced on and for the web from the Internet being used as a[n] intermediary in situation[s]. I guess the first is a completely different topic where I completely agree that there is so much going on that, yeah it’s just, it’s a different topic. The Internet as an intermediary institution– I’m not so sure if that much work of art is being bought and sold through the Internet, but I guess your point was more about the Internet as a production.

Audience member #1: But also about distribution.

Olav: [interrupting] But distribution, what was interesting–

Audience member #1: [continuing] and possession, where I mean everybody takes all, such as the winner-take-all.

Olav: Yeah, but are you thinking in reproducible works of art or also unique pieces? ‘Cause when it comes to unique pieces of course something is changed at least, but it’s very much like

additional to the current model like galleries that have added these private parts to their websites where you have to login and– that’s not what you mean? No, no, but once they would start op– What’s that?

Audience member #1: It’s the least interesting part.

Olav: Yeah Yeah I agree with that. But for all the rest of it, they, you see some dealers experimenting with that but then also being very cautious about it and I agree it’s like a pre- this economy. It’s like a pre-modern economy. Yeah, but it happens to be the topic of my talk.

Howie: Any other questions? [points to audience member]

Audience member #2: Well just to respond to the [inaudible (noise interference)] and in response to the Internet question is that I think of one the challenges in our discussion about, of this topic is that then you know you haven’t [inaudible] so you talk about the Internet in particular but we’re actually a very small community, okay? To me, being a community is [inaudible]. But the number of people actually interested in art is actually extremely small [Olav “Sure”], okay? And I take it when you’re talking about our tribe as this community that we participate in, you have to keep in mind that the markets engaged in a very [inaudible] ‘cause it’s not a retail card, it’s not a luxury commodity, it’s [inaudible] on its own. And then you take your work and you compare and contrast it with visible profits, okay? Which is actually a problem [inaudible] participation [inaudible] of another department of [inaudible]. You start taking [inaudible] describe it in terms of who’s participating? How are they participating? [inaudible] And what I take away from this is that, you know, what I really focus on is that what’s really consoled by all of us here, whether we’re the producers, the dealers, or advisors, is we’re all summoning the symbolic value. And that in itself is the commercial part. And whenever I hear an art historian raging about it [inaudible] it’s kind of like “give me a break!” You know, you’re actually engaged in a profession, okay? And you should be involved in the pricing discussions and the public presence strategies. But at the end of the day, the censors [inaudible] so self-contained [Olav “Mhmm”] that had they [inaudible] participation or [inaudible] fundamental difference imposed, is actually, probably leadership.

Olav: [to Howie] Do I have to say something?

[laughs from audience]

Audience member #2: I just think that what happens though is that though all these discussions about [inaudible] is that everybody forgets hey, okay, remember if [inaudible] [Olav "Sure"] It might be a whole bunch of [inaudible] or a whole bunch of costs. But the number of people that are actually participating in this, whether they be collectors, dealers, or artists, is actually extremely small.

Olav: Yeah.

Howie: Any other questions or comments? [gestures to audience member]

Audience member #3: I was hoping you could talk a little bit about [inaudible] this anthropological approach, just the problem that, I guess it's not anything, from the history of anthropology there are tribes that tell these outrageous lies. You've been mentioning that. And I feel like that's a little depressing where it is narratives that come from the gallerists.

Olav: Yeah yeah. Yeah, no I think, I don't, I said I don't take them as truth statements. They're stories. They're sense-making stories— not much more than that. And sometimes you can, as an outsider you can tell where it is true and where it is not. Sometimes you just don't have a clue; you don't know. So my position is in principle they're not telling the truth; it's really how to, it's a sense-making story.

Audience member #3: Right, but not to make sense but to sell stuff, 'cause I don't think that these are believed stories so much.

Olav: Well, I think, I don't know, I think partially they do that to organize their worlds, to like put themselves into a historical context, to understand what's going on right now. Yeah I do think that they, that to some extent they really do believe in it, or at least they say it so often and repeat it so often to each other that it becomes, that they start believing that now these years are really different from the decade of the 2000's.

Audience member #3: Right, and it's probably some knee-jerk response because they're trained to always say what's best for its [sic] business, so "it's great."

Olav: Yeah, sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Howie: Any other questions before we wrap this up? [pause] Comments Jason?

Jason: No.

Howie: Well, alright, so thanks a lot for coming. [applause] Thank you Olav for joining us. Check out our website. There's going to be more stuff coming up in the year.

[end]