

The Common Spectator

In my paper I want to argue that the recent economic developments have at least one crucial effect on contemporary art: they change the constitution of the spectator.

Critical art theory mostly depends on the opposition between contemporary art and the culture industry and its corresponding split of spectatorship.¹ The division into an elite and a mass audience is, from the perspective of critical art theory, for several reasons at the same time both embraced and rejected. Understanding this as a necessary paradox, the common argument sees the greater evil in the effects of culture industry and not only accepts, but argues for the necessity of what it sees as the lesser of the evils: art and its corresponding elite producer and audience.²

Such an argument, seductive as it is in its fully developed form, nevertheless misses the crucial problematic of today. I will show how the market extinguishes the difference between the split audiences. For both success and failure of the market produces above all an irreducible visibility of the market itself. I will show how that visibility of market must be first of all understood as an event.³ Aside from everyone's profession (art professional or not), intellectual habit or class status, the event of the market produces a world as well as the common belief in the economic entanglement of art. Independently of every other possible distinction concerning questions of form and content within the art world, it is this belief which inevitably generates a common notion of the work of art as a commodity.

The common understanding of art as a commodity is nevertheless often criticized for its negation of all possible symbolic, meaningful and critical differences of art works.⁴ I want to argue quite the opposite: that the market not only maintains these differences, but that it also produces them and depends on them at the same time. Moreover, it makes possible a proper understanding of the "real" exclusiveness of art. For only the common notion of the "real" difference of the two audiences makes visible that the "common people" will never be able to purchase such luxury commodities.

If this is correct, then the art market should in fact be criticized, but not demonized. I rather want to show that the new common spectator is nothing other than the possibility of a new class-consciousness. It was Georg Lukács famous dictum, that the class-consciousness will determine the fate not only of the class in question, but of society as such.⁵ In conclusion I will develop certain

1 Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*. Cambridge 2002; and Hal Foster: *Design and Crime*. Cambridge 2005

2 See e.g. Benjamin Buchloh, *From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video works*. *Art Journal* 1985

3 I am referring here first of all to Heidegger's notion of an event and therefore only indirectly to Badiou's use.

4 For example: Hal Foster: *Design and Crime*. Cambridge 2005

5 Georg Lukács: *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*. Neuwied und Berlin 1970.

scenarios, of how the “common spectator” may accordingly determine the fate of the art producer, having effects not only on the art world, but on the global world of culture at large.