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Book Review

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***WHO RUNS THE ARTWORLD: MONEY, POWER AND ETHICS*, BRAD BUCKLEY AND JOHN CONOMOS (EDS) (2017)**, Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 272 pp., ISBN: 9781911450139, p/bk, £25.00

Who runs the artworld? Although strangely the book's title lacks a question mark, the question is a pressing one, both as a symptom of genuine confusion, and a rhetorical statement of critical intent. Since the bank bailouts of 2008, the ostentatious rise of the contemporary art market and the associated global growth of biennials and iconic museums has occurred alongside rising social inequality and precarity, something mirrored in the extreme winner-take-all art system itself. Whilst the obvious link between financial power and both art market investment and philanthropy/sponsorship seems hard to practically resist, the artworld's symbolic economy remains opaque, dealing as it does in the unquantified and unlabeled currency of personal associations, secret information, and various types of informal and formal recognition. The editors, who align themselves with social activists and activist artists of the past decade, thus highlight the book's ambition to expose and reveal: 'to unmask the interconnectedness of art, economics and power' and 'to deconstruct the artworld's underlying cherished doxas, mythologies and economic power structures' (p.21).

The thirteen essays collected together in the book achieve this with varying degrees of success, utilizing a range of disciplinary methods and approaches. The editors and a number of the authors are Australian, which lends the book an interesting perspective on the global artworld, for example an unexpected (for me) and stand out essay on the changing status of Aboriginal art. It is also relevant to note that some of the essays come out of a College Arts Association conference panel organized by the editors and subtitled 'Has the Curator Failed Contemporary Art?', and it is the figure of the curator, particularly the 'star curator' arisen since the 80s, who is the main protagonist throughout the book, no longer a backroom 'care taker' of objects, but an agent wielding enormous cultural power both in terms of how art is seen or 'experienced' by audiences, and as a gatekeeper enabling or preventing access for artists to the artworld's inner sanctums.

The book is divided into three sections: money, power and ethics. In practice these terms tend to interrelate and imply each other, whilst a series of sub-themes emerge around questions to do with activism, representation, intentionality, the experience economy, the post-critical condition, etc. The various takes on these themes are not always in alignment. In a re-reading of Carol Duncan's 1983 essay 'Who Rules the Art World?', Gregory Sholette describes a shift in power that has occurred in more recent times from the critic to the curator, the latter now taking on 'the indispensable task of sorting, labeling, and ranking art and artists' (p.63). Parallel shifts with regard to a type

of artist (e.g. the YBAs) who embraced both the market and popular culture have led to a new and more complex interpretative model with regard to the question of artworld control. It is no longer a simple case of unveiling the class interests and pointing to the specific individuals behind elite cultural tastes and museum board membership. If 'institutional critique' revealed art to be a business, then today the artworld, in the sense of institutionalized discourse, accepts the economic imperatives and capitalistic structures of contemporary art, or at least experiences them as a sort of impersonal, self-replicating machine 'operating with the twin currencies of prestige and cultural capital [...] that one hopes to harvest for the purposes of career advancement' (p.59). Sholette sees an uprising of structurally 'failed' artists refusing to serve this machine as industry-supportive functionaries. Michael Birchall, making the plausible defense that curators are not much different from artists in terms of operating in a precarious, post-Fordist creative labour market, adopts an imperative tone, suggesting there is little choice but to become a sort of driven, self-punishing machine, an entrepreneur managing numerous projects, and relentlessly networking in order to garner opportunities to put on exhibitions.

Giving a long historical account of the curatorial function, Adam Geczy describes a period of contemporary ideological confusion where intellectual accountability has been eclipsed by superficial 'cultural experiences' as museums chase audience figures and reject the 'laboratory ethic' which was once the informing principle at MoMA. Okwui Enwezor is an example of a curator who places '*ideas* back into the epicenter of the *experience*', rather than using artists as pawns or brands performing themselves. Jennifer A McMahon and Carol Ann Gilchrist also caution against an 'attention economy devoid of art', making a clear case that 'art's indeterminacy creates the conditions for the establishment of *inter-subjectivity*' (p.202) – a dialogical search for common terms from which to establish consensus. Against the sort of information supplied by gallery captions that imply an authoritative interpretation, but also against the coercive, solipsistic mechanisms of personal branding opportunities, they suggest that curators provide space not just for art works but for critical inter-subjective exchanges of the kind that may provide models 'for commitment compatible with tolerance' (p.202). How exactly this is done is less clear – the example given of *Les Immatériaux*, the exhibition co-curated by philosopher JF Lyotard at the Centre Pompidou in 1985 is questioned by another contributor, Juli Carson, on the grounds that its refusal of conventional curatorial ordering and direction ended up as a sort of dysfunctional celebration of the unrepresentable capitalist 'real' – a theatrical embodiment of the philosopher's own 'acritical' method. By comparison, the art group Strike Debt achieve a politically charged tactical rendezvous with the financial markets by buying bundled debt and absolving it, thus terminating the incessant trade in aggregated drops squeezed from subprime debtors.

Towards the end of the book Ian McLean reminds us that, despite the supposed retreat of criticality, it is *theory* that still holds the power to dispense meaning and value to artworks, and that through the theoretical twists and turns and a sort of Hegelian 'cunning of reason', Aboriginal art may finally enter into the

artworld institutions through the appropriate critical discursive framework (after having first gained visibility through self-conscious market strategies).

There is a lot of very interesting material in the book, much more than is possible to cover in a short review. Unfortunately, the enjoyment of the book is somewhat marred by very many spelling mistakes and other errors (including the editors' erroneous description of Liberate Tate's protest performance as involving a 'woman covered in molasses' – somewhat embarrassing as the naked figure adorning the cover of the book is clearly a man). In terms of art education, the book is highly relevant, both as an indication of the kinds of critical and activist-oriented artworks and discourses which have grown in our highly charged political moment, but also (although this is not addressed directly) because the power of both the art market and neoliberal government agendas are a constant presence on art courses, manifested in such things as artists talks, professional practice units and the effects of student fee debt. The book provides some of the context and conceptual tools to help us recognize and address these issues.