



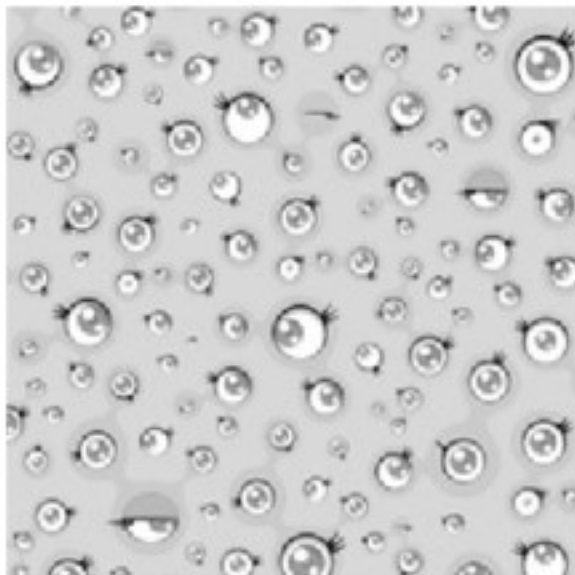
Too many galleries, not enough art

The market today requires that young artists have global representation, but unless they embrace Warholesque production techniques few can keep pace with the demand this entails

By Marc Spiegler

Two minutes into our interview, the young East Village artist requests anonymity. Usually, he is as media-friendly as they come, a buoyant and voluble talker with an ample dose of charisma. But the topic has turned to the problems that develop when a hot young artist starts working with myriad galleries. In the last few years, it has become impossible to miss work by the artist—let us call him Lorenzo—in art fairs and magazines. His edition sizes have tripled, his prices have doubled. Despite only truly launching his career in the late 90s, he has already had solo exhibitions with a dozen different galleries on several continents. “I like showing all over the world,” Lorenzo says. “But sometimes I feel really stretched thin—especially when I open up my email in the morning and it takes me two hours to get through all the different requests.”

But it is not email overload that has Lorenzo hiding behind a pseudonym. Like most artists, he had long worked with a “primary” dealer, who brokered business dealings with all the other galleries. But as Lorenzo’s market took off and more people wanted to show his work, things turned tricky. “It got to be a real problem,” he explains. “My primary gallery kept making things too contractually difficult for the others—like demanding 25% consignment fees, which makes breaking even very hard unless they sold out the show. And the primary gallery kept saying, ‘We can sell your work. Why do you need all those other galleries?’ They would put pieces on hold instead of letting other galleries show them.” Finally, he terminated the relationship, cutting himself loose at a critical moment in his market’s development.



One of the few buzz artists able to keep pace with market's demands, Takashi Murakami set up a factory-style production method: 25 assistants toil in Tokyo and Brooklyn studios to create pieces such as "Jellyfish eyes", 2001

Once upon a time, young artists started their careers with a single gallery in their home country. Scoring international representation was a consecration that occurred only once the artist had an established reputation and a proven market. But that old model has been pulverised. Today, both in Europe and America, artists only a few years out of school commonly have some combination of several European galleries, dealers on both US coasts, and perhaps something more exotic, like representation in Japan or Latin America. Yet in the same way that a college degree has devolved from being a symbol of high achievement to a minimum requirement for decent employment, having multiple international galleries is now just an early step toward art world success.

In some ways, this marks an excellent development. Artists can transcend their domestic markets, giving them a greater chance of finding collectors and institutions receptive to their work. But there are also pitfalls in the new state of play, including creative burnout, feuding between galleries and eroding the artist's market. "At the beginning of an artist's career it helps to be showing their work around as much as possible," says dealer Matthias Arndt of Berlin. "But not once they start having an international market. At that point one gallery in the US and two in Europe, at the maximum, should be enough. Otherwise everybody involved, including the artist, can easily start becoming unhappy."

Before we dive into this pit of discord, let us address a more fundamental question: What changed? In part, this shift merely reflects the extent to which internet communication, cheap airfare, and the ubiquity of the English language have made geography generally less relevant to our lives today. But there are also crucial art world-specific factors. Charles Saatchi once described his compulsive hoovering-up of MA shows as a form of "neophilia", and that compulsion has proven highly contagious. In fact, it exerts perhaps the single greatest influence upon the current market, because so many collectors today—whether veteran buyers or newcomers to the game—follow Saatchi's lead, vying to spot young artists first, rather than secure canonised works. Events such as London's Frieze Art Fair are judged, in large part, on their ability to offer collectors and curators new discoveries. The big surprise during Art Basel Miami Beach was the satellite New Art Dealers Alliance fair, where young galleries showing virtually unknown artists drew major collectors to two unfinished storefronts.

Of course, if their clients constantly crave something new, it makes sense for galleries to look further afield for their stock. Thus, even recently opened galleries are likely to inject some internationalism into their rosters. "Our British artists tend to be younger, and we want them to be perceived in an international context, not a parochial setting," explains Nicholas Baker of London's fa projects gallery, which opened in 2001 and currently counts eight foreigners among its 16 artists. "It may be easier to sell British artists to British collectors, but, at art fairs in other countries, it helps to have an artist that local collectors identify with. Also, working with artists in the US or in Japan puts us in contact with a whole network of other galleries, museums and collectors."

Simultaneous to the "neophilia" epidemic, there has been a quantum shift in how artists approach their careers. "At one level painters or photographers are just like other people—they can be nice or nasty, loyal or disloyal—but some striking changes have taken place in the last two decades," says veteran New York dealer Sean Kelly. "The older generation of artists that I've worked with—people such as John Baldessari, Joseph Kosuth and Rebecca Horn—make art because they cannot imagine doing anything else when they get up every morning. But now we are dealing with the second generation of 'professional' artists, who graduated from art school fully expecting to have steady sales, frequent exhibitions and a comfortable lifestyle."



Charles Saatchi

Many of those younger artists deploy a strategy akin to the pop-star quest for omnipresence, with each gallery serving as yet another platform to spread their "brand." More expedient ones even play galleries off against each other. The stakes can include the production of a catalogue (and then the degree of its lavishness), the timing of the show (September openings are always

desirable) and sales guarantees. More and more, however, production costs are becoming a major negotiating issue. "Some artists can be quite Machiavellian," says one Swiss dealer, requesting anonymity. "They demand that the gallery fully fund production of a major piece as a condition of doing their show. And if the show doesn't sell well, they pull the same trick with the next gallery that approaches them. So they get expensive pieces produced, while the galleries get stuck with the costs."

But there is a thin line between an artist having many galleries and their having too many galleries. While there is an endless supply of Next New Artists, unless they have the production-line mentality of an Andy Warhol or Takashi Murakami, few can generate as much work as the market demands once the buzz hits fever pitch. "If an artist is working with four or five galleries, each one is asking him to provide new pieces for each art fair they do, plus the solo shows every two years or so," Mr Arndt says. "When is the artist supposed to produce that substantial body of work for a major museum show?"

Often, quality is just as big an issue as quantity. "I advise our artists not to work with so many galleries, because most of them only have a capacity to make a certain amount of good art," says René Lahn, director of Zurich's Galerie Eva Presenhuber. "When I lived in England, I saw a lot of London artists take on too many commitments, especially those people who wanted to have that same pop-star status as a Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin. Soon, they started showing everything, everywhere. But there's a very real danger there: if the quality of the art suffers, their whole market can collapse."

Artists working in editioned mediums such as video or photography are somewhat sheltered from this problem, because they can place the same piece with various galleries. But only somewhat; since today's collectors and curators travel so much, such work can rapidly become over-exposed. "There's a real risk of losing the exclusivity that entices a collector to buy a work of art," points out Pierre Huber of Galerie Art + Public, godfather of the Geneva contemporary-art scene. "I was just studying a dossier on [German sculptor] Carsten Holler and I noticed that the pieces are being executed in editions of five, with two artist proofs. That's far too much. I have the same problem with [Australian photographer] Tracey Moffat." As any economics student could tell you, there is a major menace to the market here: commoditisation, which always gives buyers the upper hand.

Some artists—such as UK videomaker Douglas Gordon or German painter Anton Henning—take an active role in allocating pieces to their various galleries. Others deliberately avoid the issue. "Verne Dawson is one of those people who just wants to paint," explains Mr Lahn, whose gallery just showed the American artist. "He lets [New York gallerist] Gavin Brown decide which pieces go where. Obviously, that takes a lot of trust on the part of the artist." Because galleries are competing for whatever works an artist can produce, such primary-dealer status is pivotal. "The artist's main gallery always has the best access, and everyone knows that, so the collectors and museums will come to you first," explains Glenn Scott Wright of London's Victoria Miro gallery. "Our aim always is to control the most material possible."

But even when an artist's primary gallery remains officially unchanged, the introduction of behemoths such as White Cube, Marian Goodman or Gagosian into the mix inevitably shifts the balance—often simply because the bigger player has the cash flow to fund the artist's more ambitious projects. "Look at what happened when Thomas Ruff switched New York dealers and left 303 Gallery to join David Zwirner," points out Mr Huber, whose large personal collection of Ruff photos goes on display this month at Geneva's MAMCO museum. "His European galleries used to get a whole edition of five photographs. Now Zwirner gets two and the others get one each, which makes it much harder for them financially, especially if Ruff is one of their few stars."

An equally complicated issue between galleries is “placement,” that is, the control exercised over which collectors and institutions are allowed to buy the work. Especially for artists just starting to develop a market, potential buyers are reassured to hear that major players have bought into the oeuvre. But not all galleries can afford to be so selective, so speculative buyers who get turned down by one dealer commonly try their luck with another. Chaos can rapidly ensue as works start getting flipped to secondary dealers—or, worse yet, auction houses.

Pricing often proves problematic as well. It would seem to make sense, for example, to offer an emerging artist’s work at lower rates in places where they are less well known. But that is not possible in today’s globalised market. “The collectors are all on the same VIP circuit, getting flown to all the major fairs,” Mr Lahn says. “And they follow prices closely. So the galleries have to be perfectly in step, not just on the listed prices but also on how discounting will be handled.” Any faltering on that front and art world arbitrage is unleashed, with speculators buying low in, say, France and selling high in New York.

Of course, even the most collegial galleries are not playing on an even field. “When you are not the primary gallery, you are always at a disadvantage,” Mr Huber says. “I worked a lot with [New York gallery] Metro Pictures on Cindy Sherman exhibitions. We had to pay consignment costs, shipping and insurance, and then spend money to develop Swiss collectors for her work. But if those collectors then went to New York and wanted to buy Cindy Sherman, Metro Pictures would never send them back to me. Plus, Metro Pictures had an extra 10% to offer as a discount, because they don’t have to pay a consignment fee.”

As a rule, the primary gallery and the artist have the strongest role in setting global prices. But there is another rule that comes into play here: American galleries always push for higher prices. “It’s Economics 101,” explains one major Manhattan dealer. “New York is the most important art market, so we can be more aggressive due to the high volume of collectors coming through the gallery. Plus, we have higher running costs. The big problems develop when galleries can’t sell work at home in those smaller markets. I remember turning up once at Art Basel and discovering that one of our artists had work on nine different stands. Nobody sold any of his pieces. After the fair, I rang up that artist and told him we couldn’t work like that.”

Indeed, if the sharing of artists causes an ambient friction between the various galleries involved, the issue often boils over at big fairs. First off, some collectors try to leverage the breakneck intensity of such events. “I’ve had people pretend they were getting a 20% discount on one of our artists from another gallery, and demand the same from me,” Mr Arndt recalls. “Fortunately, that’s rare. But not rare enough.” And in a place where people can comparison-shop an artist’s oeuvre by taking a 15-minute stroll around the fair, what passionate collector would knowingly buy also-rans? “This is such a complex issue, yet many galleries seem to handle it in a surprisingly improvised way,” observes Samuel Keller, director of Art Basel. “Every year, somehow, two different galleries apply for the Art Statements solo-booth section using the same artist. There seem to be deep communication problems between some of the younger dealers. Each gallery is contacting collectors, museum curators and biennials to promote the same artist. In the end it risks becoming kind of cannibalistic.”

