

The value of art

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For very long time, the essential way through which art has demonstrated its economic value has been collecting. When an artwork was sold, everyone could realize how much it was worth - or at least, everyone who was able to know the price of the transaction. Today, the art market is more vital than ever and thus, nowadays more than ever, there is a widespread awareness of the fact that art is generating economic value, and increasingly so.

But the collecting of contemporary art has been subtly but steadily changing its nature through time. As any other form of collecting, it is an attempt to establish a (not always) reasonable compromise between the fetishistic passion that mandates to 'get everything' (or at least to desire everything) and the cultural vision that, on the contrary, calls for hindsight and parsimony, both emotional and economic-financial. But today, collecting contemporary art has become much more than that - or, depending on the viewpoint, much less. It is a social trend, which in some social environments is almost becoming an imperative. Why? The answer is, in a sense, very simple: because contemporary art collecting today represents the outpost of what we could define the project of identity creation that lies at the basis of the construction of the social and economic value of current post-industrial societies.

Collecting art is no longer just a way to express personal taste or social status, but rather turns into a way to take position, more or less consciously, within a very complex, perpetually changing symbolic arena. It is a way to define oneself and one's own world of meaning beyond aesthetical canons, in a situation where narrating to others who one is or who one aspires to be has subtly but inexorably become our main occupation during our social life.

Particularly interesting in this respect is the phenomenon of collecting in economically emerging countries, such as some of the Far Eastern or Arabian ones, where a rampant

social and entrepreneurial class, anxious to establish a distinctive identity of its own, often adopts the languages and conventions of meaning of contemporary art as the symbolic counterpart of its acquired condition of new protagonist in the global economy. And the extent and velocity of this relatively new phenomenon make it particularly evident another, crucial aspect of the collecting of the contemporary: its link to geo-politics.

The moment of extraordinary attention toward art coming from China or India reflects in a natural way not only the economic dynamism but also, and especially, the increasing political weight of these countries, and in some respects provides an authoritative, indirect cultural validation of it. It is beyond doubt that cultural scenes such as the Chinese or the Indian one, invested as they are by a wind of change and put in the position to be able to express eventually what for a long time did not find enough space or attention, are today inevitably among the most interesting and vital at the global level. But at the same time one cannot help noticing how attention toward these art forms manifests itself in spite of any sort of reasoning about quality or of any actual competence or knowledge of their languages or driving issues. It is, in fact, an attitude that basically reflects the acknowledgement of the fact that these countries are today places of identity even more than physical or political places, and that they have to be presided as not-to-be-missed expressions of the Zeitgeist.

To what extent, then, art expresses an economic value and to what extent instead it reflects it? Can these dynamics of attention and of purchase be justified according to the familiar categories of collecting? Not entirely. Fads and fashions have always existed, but they were expressions of the taste of a small, opinion leader minority, as convincingly argued by Georg Simmel in his by now classical trickle-down theory of fashion. Now it is taste itself that gets molded by more fundamental factors that have to do with what we could call the economics of meaning. In a time when it is increasingly difficult to recognize oneself in far-reached ideologies or visions of the world, contemporary art delivers a spectacular possibility of morphogenesis of meaning that can serve to all purpose: to investigate the

ultimate meaning of life, the reasons for caring, or not caring, about others, the ways in which to use one's riches, if any. Contemporary art is not an ideology for the simple reason that it does not aspire to any coherence, to any closed-loop control on the perception and interpretation of reality. But exactly for this reason, it is always unbeatable: whatever kind of position, attitude or experience will always find its proper place in it. Art thus candidates itself quite convincingly to become the definitive non-ideology, an all-encompassing view, cannibal phenomenological filter and is ready to suit all possible needs and circumstances.

In this perspective, it is hard to maintain that the value of art today has essentially to do with the value of what is being sold in the art markets, despite the fact that they have never been so dynamic, seductive and inclusive. The value of art has to do with the way we today build the fabric of our stipulations of reality, and is in particular one of the few ways left to weave it in ways that are as much compatible as humanly possible with cultural, social and ethnic differences.

After announcing for centuries the death of art, are we in fact now ready to celebrate its final triumph? I do not know. The very fact that art is becoming what it is for our contemporary society and civilization, is changing the social processes that supersede its production and reproduction. Art is also a capital in the economic sense of the word, and consequently an increasing number of economic layers, from banks (which have been there for a long while now) but also corporations, medium and even small firms as well as a myriad of private operators and yes, also collectors in jumping in, screaming louder and louder to get their slice of the cake. In the middle of all this noise, will artists be able to keep going? Will they be able to defend their private space of creation? This is not a romantic or idealistic question, it is a most pragmatic one. The real threat to the future of art is its very social and economic success, which could, in an ironically Marxian way, express a basic contradiction that contains the seeds of its crisis. Whether or not this is going to happen will depend, as always, on the artists and on their choices, on their

ability to stick to the sources of what is meaningful to them. Long live the artists, in the interest of us all.