New York Real Estate and the Ruin of American Art*

JOSH KLINE

The first step towards a cure is admitting you have a problem. Contemporary art in twenty-first-century America is sick with problems. These are not problems raised by artworks as subjects of concern, but structural malignancies in the United States that are present in art's curation, its institutions, and its patronage; in the commercial entities that sell it and the schools that produce the people who participate in its world. The result is a tidal wave of art whose primary function as decorative speculative financial instruments eclipses any possibility of inquiry, experimentation, or real meaning. These problems share a root cause: New York City real estate and its currently impossible prices and rents, which smother art in a choking, conservative atmosphere. American art is suffering a polycrisis that combines a lack of belief in and support for its artists born after 1975, the structural de-centering of artists in the art industry, and the subsequent stagnation and possible breakdown of formal innovation in art. In other words, meaningful art, relevant for society and our time, may not be sustainable under the current conditions here.

Three costs combine to nurture contemporary art's *dysbiosis* in America. First and foremost, there is the cost of real estate and rents in New York and to a lesser extent Los Angeles, the cities that the majority of America's working artists, curators, and art dealers are forced to call home by the art industry's unspoken operating systems. Second is the cost of living in these cities, especially the lifestyle co-pay required to network there. Third is the cost of arts education in the country's pedigreed private art schools, the overwhelming majority of which are fueled by predatory student debt. Interacting with these costs—emerging from and exacerbating them—is the capturing, by older generations and the wealthy, of the various forms of real estate that art depends on and the capturing of the curatorial agency, social capital, and commercial power that emerge from those artificially scarce physical spaces.

I say all of this as someone seen as a successful artist inside of New York's art industry but who is very much still subject to and struggling under these condi-

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tions. None of these problems in our field can be separated from the country's larger political crisis. New York City's runaway real-estate prices, and the unaffordability of housing nationwide, are a result of epochal transfers of wealth from the middle and working classes and the poor to the rich during the 2008 financial crisis, the ensuing recession, and the pandemic. The problems discussed in this essay are about time and agency. Only a fortunate few among the many artists living in New York support themselves through the sale of their work. In 2026, most New York artists have to hold down one or more full- or part-time jobs in order to pay the rent, put food on the table, and make art. If artists are starved of time to make their art, they are also starved of time to participate in political activism. Artists who care about politics and society will be forced to make a false choice between art and politics—and between both of them and making a living. Finding ways to reopen contemporary art to artists who aren't rich is part of a larger battle to redistribute political agency to the majority of the population and restore a democratic society. Art is a fundamental part of all human cultures. It is a part of politics: It is political speech. An art of the status quo whose only purpose is to decorate the palaces of the rich is as political as an explicit art of opposition.

Real Estate

The canonical breakthroughs in art that occurred in the 1960s and '70s in New York—Conceptual art, video art, performance art, Minimalism, and so on—would not have been possible without that era's cheap rents.[1] But today, in a society in which government funding doesn't support individual artists and rents are exploitatively expensive, where are American artists who don't come from money supposed to go? Into oblivion?

On the other side of the pandemic, vast swathes of Manhattan's commercial real estate remain vacant. Uptown, downtown, and in midtown, above the storefronts filled with grotesquely expensive supermarkets, restaurants, and coffee shops, endless nail salons, too-big-to-fail banks, luxury-clothing boutiques, etc., the upper floors of older commercial buildings are rife with empty offices abandoned in the shift to hybrid work. With all this empty real estate, why aren't we living in a new golden age of DIY project spaces and experimental art? Why aren't New York's empty offices filled with art studios?

One answer is that the city of New York's tax policies make it more profitable to leave commercial space empty than to lower the rents. A second answer is that most young artists starting out in the city have to work some combination of a full-time job and freelance gigs, and even then they can barely afford to live in New York. Most young artists here—the majority of whom make a living and exist outside the art market—struggle to afford studios. And if they can afford one, most are only

1. The cheap rents and overall inexpensive cost of living at the time for artists living and working in Manhattan were a consequence of massive white flight into the suburbs and the deterioration of New York's urban fabric that resulted from the evisceration of the city's tax base. If so many middle-class and wealthy white people hadn't left the city, there would have been much greater pressure on the prices and rents for Manhattan apartments—even downtown.

able to work in them at night or on the weekends. Cheaper commercial spaces in New York tend to be larger and in rougher shape, requiring a greater up-front investment to cover the deposit, first and last month's rent, and any demo and build-out. Making sense of bigger spaces that need to be subdivided requires a network of peers who could split that cost or become subtenants. But among young emerging artists, the ones who have the kind of money that allows them to split the costs of a gut renovation are already privileged, equipped with generational wealth.

Let's do the math. For a typical studio in Brooklyn, the cost for studio space routinely exceeds $3 per square foot, with the cost per square foot scaling up as the size of a studio scales down. The smallest studios, which are 100 to 200 square feet, can often rent for $700 to $1,000 per month, which comes out to $4–$5 or more per square foot. One square foot of studio space today is typically at least three times the price it would have been in the early 2000s, when commercial space in Manhattan's Chinatown and the neighborhood now known as NoMad (North of Madison Square) was renting for $1 per square foot. In the mid-2000s in Bushwick, Greenpoint, Long Island City, and Gowanus, it was still possible to find rents at or around the same rate. My own first studio in Long Island City, which I shared with the painter Trevor Shimizu, was around 400 square feet and initially rented for $600 per month in 2006 (at a rate of around $1.50 per square foot), which felt expensive at the time. With our nonprofit-arts-organization salaries, we both struggled to afford our halves of the rent. But if commercial rents have increased by 300 percent, the wages for the kinds of work that young artists often support themselves with—studio assistants, art handlers, etc.—have most definitely not. Residential rents in most New York City neighborhoods have also outpaced pay and salary increases over the past twenty-five years.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the scale of the studios in which emerging artists make their work has contracted. It should also come as no surprise that for artists from working-class and middle-class backgrounds, renting a studio has become three times harder, which is to say, often impossible. The scale of sculpture in these studios shrinks compared to what was possible two or three decades before. And sadly, these problems aren't restricted to younger sculptors. In the middle of what one art dealer recently described to me as the worst recession in the art market in four decades, many regularly exhibiting "successful" mid-career sculptors who have been based in New York for decades are downsizing or closing their studios. I am one of them. Only three years after being the subject of a well-received mid-career survey exhibition at the Whitney Museum, I can only describe living and working as an artist in New York City as completely unsustainable. And I'm one of the lucky ones. How can a studio-based sculpture practice develop or sustain itself in a city like New York? For many younger artists who are still in art school or freshly graduated from it and asking themselves which medium they should embrace in their practices, the answer has been to turn to a commercially oriented painting practice.[2]

2. A noticeable number of mid-career artists who made their names with conceptual or experimental sculpture, video, or installations have also attempted to pivot to painting as the market for all these other media has shriveled.

Artist-Run Spaces

Not surprisingly, perhaps, there is a dearth of artist-run spaces, which require available real estate and charmed landlords willing to give up temporary space cheap or for free. With what time or money would young artists find these? Most artists devote what little time they have after the end of a five- or six-day work week to making their own art. Over the past decade and a half, compensation for artistic labor has rightly become a rallying cry for artists and art workers, many of whom have come to recognize their own exploitation by a system that profits from their ideas, labor, artworks, and exhibitions but frequently chooses to pay them back with cultural, intellectual, or social capital instead of money. You can't pay your rent with art press, references to your work in scholarly essays, digital images circulating on social media, or invitations to exclusive openings, art dinners, and afterparties. You also can't cover your rent with the meager artist fees and honoraria paid by museums and arts nonprofits and publications. Many emerging artists now take ethical stands against participating in projects that offer no monetary compensation. In the past ten years, I've seen artists turn down exhibitions as well as offers to curate shows, contribute to publications, make books, even do residencies because they do not compensate artists with money. Finding empty space, cleaning it up, and offering it to artists for free is often no longer enough. Fees must be raised and paid. The cost of living here can no longer be ignored.

There is a real and meaningful difference between a true artist-run space and institutional alternative spaces. The difference is that young artists have no say in who exhibits in institutional alternative spaces. While many of New York's alternative spaces, such as the Kitchen, White Columns, and Artists Space, started out as artist-run spaces, today they are closer in structure and spirit to museums, run by professional arts administrators and curators. Like their larger cousins—the art museums—they are largely fueled by and dependent on charitable donations from their boards and a sympathetic network of patrons through which they access neoliberal capital via philanthropy rather than through the market, as commercial galleries do. Their remaining funding comes via grants, both from foundations and—up until Trump's second term—the government. Money from both patrons and the government comes with strings attached. Curators must please, appease, and avoid offending the sources of income that keep the lights on. They must play a guessing game about what they can get away with, often preemptively censoring themselves and their institutions. As Trump's reign continues, in all institutions that take money from the government, as well as in those that don't but fear its ire, we will likely see less art dealing explicitly with American politics, American history, race, gender, and identity.

The lack of true artist-run alternative spaces in the American art industry's center is important because it is often only in artist-run spaces that artists—as individuals and as groups—can work out their ideas on their own terms. For most artists, it's only possible to fully understand a body of work that they've made when

it becomes an exhibition. The exhibition is the text that allows viewers to understand the broader context of the individual works artists make. Group exhibitions are the place where conceptual, contextual, formal, and art-historical relationships between artists and artworks are sketched out. Exhibitions remain the main route through which artists bring their art to their peers and to the public. The images of artworks that circulate on social media and in the press are usually photographs documenting the work in exhibitions. In non-commercial artist-run spaces, artists hold a final veto on decisions about who exhibits, what a show is, and what art can be: Dealers, institutional curators, and educators do not get the final call. The other concerns that these gatekeepers juggle—client sales, ticket sales, making funders or administrators happy, avoiding political offense, their own generational or class or racial biases, etc.—are absent in spaces like these. Preconceived notions about what will sell are not the determining factor for whether artists receive invitations to exhibit in DIY artist-run spaces. Very little work gets sold out of these true alternative spaces. The communities of young artists that come together and thrive in them compete to make ambitious work and exhibitions, not to make sales.

The scarcity of artist-run spaces is likely one factor inhibiting the emergence of major new art movements in the United States over the past quarter century. Museums, galleries, and art schools don't see nurturing artist communities and the art movements they give birth to as part of their job. In institutions that exhibit art, curators think carefully about how many times an artist appears in a group or solo exhibition in their space. With rare exceptions, appearing in a major group exhibition like the Whitney Biennial means you won't be considered for the next iteration, regardless of how your work develops.[3] If you have a solo exhibition at a nonprofit alternative space like White Columns or the Kitchen, you basically become ineligible for another solo show there or at any similar spaces in New York for at least a decade, if not longer. Curators are also unlikely to give solo shows to more than one artist from the same art scene or group of artists. While these rules don't appear in a physical rule book, everyone in New York's art industry is well aware of them. This institutional limitation means that for most young artists, regular solo shows in New York only happen within a commercial context at the gallery that represents them. Today, emerging artists who don't make paintings have a harder time securing commercial representation. All this means that at the beginning of their careers, these artists have fewer solo shows in the city they live in than similar artists did even a decade ago.

My own career and the careers of artists in my cohort during the early 2010s would never have happened without artist-run spaces and platforms like 179 Canal, Dismagazine.com, Ramiken Crucible, 247365, and Real Fine Arts, among others. Alongside DIY projects like Cleopatra's and Audio Visual Arts, these were

3. This was not the case in the twentieth century. In the 1990s, for instance, the artist Charlie Ray appeared in multiple Whitney Biennials in a single decade.

spaces for and by our generation of artists where we were able to develop new practices, ideas, forms, and communities. At 179 Canal, which was founded by the artist Margaret Lee, there was no concern about working with an artist too many times. There were no successful boomer artists to compete with for exhibition slots. There were also no unspoken quotas[4] limiting the number of POC artists with whom she could work. Margaret did not discriminate against artists without prestigious MFA degrees either. In her project space, she was able to experiment with radical inclusion. For over a year, she literally said yes to everyone who came to her with a proposal for an exhibition, performance, or event.

The painter Christopher Wool recently rented the empty nineteenth floor of a skyscraper in New York City's Financial District and staged a survey of his own work there. Among the works on view were photographs shot on East Broadway during a scrappier era both for him and Chinatown. The environment in which he installed those photos, which included his signature abstract paintings and drawings, was raw, with ragged exposed-concrete floors, columns full of holes, and unfinished and shredded Sheetrock decorated occasionally with scrawled contractor notes, obscene graffiti, and official government notices. In every way, it appeared to be an archetypal New York artist-run space—if you ignored the corporate security in the shiny ground-floor lobby, the spectacular view looking down on FiDi's office buildings, and the art likely valued in the tens of millions of dollars hanging on the walls. Wool's show was LARPing as a kind of Epcot Center version of downtown New York. The Wool show and some of its recent Lower East Side gallery antecedents constitute expensive, luxury reenactments of a punk past no longer available to the kind of young artists from working-class or middle-class backgrounds who, once upon a time, helped forge the template for this type of space. Other painters who have been successful in the market in recent years, like Jamian Juliano-Villani in New York and Laura Owens[5] in Los Angeles, have been more generous with their project spaces, mounting exhibitions by other artists and funding them with some of the proceeds of their lucrative painting practices. In their spaces, they have put on the kind of adventurous, often commercially unviable programming that America's commercial galleries have turned their backs on. And yet the alternative remains as a ghostly question: What would a twenty-first-century American art world look like in which many different kinds of artists—not just well-off, market-approved white painters—put forward arguments about what contemporary art could be? What would happen if these questions were reclaimed by artists and taken away from the art industry?

4. The New York art world of the 2000s was intensely segregated. For many of the most prestigious galleries at the time, it was common to have no Black artists and perhaps only a single Asian or Asian-American artist on their roster. When Margaret Lee and her partner Oliver Newton opened their commercial gallery 47 Canal in early 2011, it was the only New York gallery whose roster was majority Asian-American.

5. Owens launched her artist-run space 356 Mission Road with a massive, ambitious solo exhibition of her own work. Unlike Wool's temporary space, however, 356 Mission Road continued on after Owens's show, staging solo and group exhibitions devoted to the work of other artists for the next five years.

New York City

In order to ignite an institutional art career exhibiting in museums and not-for-profit exhibition spaces or a commercial art career exhibiting in for-profit art galleries, most American artists still have to find a way to climb the ladder in the Big Apple. Despite the geographical vastness of the United States, most of America's art industry is crammed into New York City, where the lion's share of American art collectors reside and the largest percentage of American art is sold. Opportunities in our field are often dependent on chance encounters at industry networking events like openings, public programs, and gallery dinners—not to mention at the bars, clubs, and restaurants that industry workers frequent. The pressure on artists to be present in New York to get a professional career going cannot be overstated. And American artists know it.

A major part of an American curator's job is to woo patrons in order to fundraise for their shows and institutions. These commitments leave them with precious little time to conduct research, curate their shows, and write catalogue essays. For the Whitney Biennial and the New Museum Triennial, curators use their limited research and travel budgets to touch down in a handful of other cities for studio visits every two or three years. Otherwise, most American curators aren't given the budgets or the time to scour the country in search of artists who have chosen to make their stand in a regional city. For *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1, the curators are restricted to New York City and its immediate environs. For *Made in LA*, curators are limited to Los Angeles.

New York gallerists aren't going on regular road trips across the US either. While New York's art dealers may regularly visit Basel or Hong Kong, the majority are not making routine trips to Pittsburgh or Portland or even Chicago. If they do, it is to attend exhibition openings for artists they already represent or for the purpose of visiting collectors. Most of the foreign curators who organize regular international survey exhibitions devoted to contemporary art in cities like Venice, Kassel, Istanbul, São Paulo, Sharjah, and Gwangju aren't crisscrossing the United States either. If they come to America looking for artists at all,[6] they rarely go beyond the country's two biggest cities. The same goes for curators at museums in America's smaller cities: It's easier to just visit New York and LA for research, where they can also network with funders and colleagues.

Unlike filmmakers, novelists, musicians, playwrights, and other "creatives," visual artists are not supposed to pitch themselves and their projects without an invitation. There's an unspoken taboo here—one of many that have likely come down to us as an inheritance from Western fine art's origins around aristocratic courts and the church. One of the quickest ways artists can annoy and offend gal-

6. As a result of post-pandemic increases in the cost of shipping, many international curators based in Europe and Asia no longer have budgets to ship art from North America. Trump's return to power and America's disastrous trade wars and foreign policies have also soured some foreign curators on showing American art.

lerists and curators is to send unsolicited materials or proposals. The artist Georgia Sagri once likened an artist's lot to that of a sixteen-year-old American girl in the 1950s who had to be asked to attend the school dance by a boy. The rule is that we have to hang around until a curator or gallery employee notices us and says something along the lines of "What are you working on?" or "I've been thinking about you" or "I want to visit your studio." These words magically unseal the artist's ability to promote their work. This places enormous pressure on young artists to be present in New York to entertain these career bouncers, blowing conceptual balloon animals at the bar or acting as a nightlife safari guide for aging curators, etc. You can't make sexy eyes or do your comedy routine at a gallery after-party in Tribeca if you're in Seattle or Houston. Where are Cleveland's ambitious artists? Or Baltimore's? Or Boston's? Or Lawrence, Kansas's? They're almost all in New York or LA.

Galleries

Rirkrit Tirivanija's recent survey at MoMA PS1, curated by Ruba Katrib and Yasmil Raymond, presented documentation of one of his early solo shows in 1991 at Randy Alexander Gallery in SoHo. When it opened, the only object in the gallery was a pair of binoculars on the windowsill. The binoculars allowed visitors to occasionally catch a glimpse of a young Tirivanija at work as an art handler at the gallery across the street. Occasionally he'd send voice recordings to the gallery. Can you imagine a single art dealer in Manhattan allowing a young artist to mount a solo exhibition like that today?

Let's talk about the costs of doing business for NYC galleries: the astronomical cost of rent in Manhattan's major gallery neighborhoods—Chelsea, the Upper East Side, Tribeca, and the Lower East Side—and the cost of paying the wages and, in some cases, health insurance of employees who must pay residential rents in downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn's gentrifying neighborhoods. According to Zillow, the median rent for a one-bedroom apartment in New York is currently around $3,500, although in many of the aforementioned neighborhoods the rent is significantly higher. Gallery employees must be able to afford the expensive bars, restaurants, nightlife, recreational drugs, clothes, and personal maintenance required to network and advance careers in the field. All of these costs/co-pays also involve New York real estate. The expensive commercial rent that the restaurants, bars, clothing stores, and salons are paying ultimately factor into the salary requirements of gallery employees as well. These ancillary businesses must also pay their own employees enough for them to afford living in New York. The next time you're in a gallery in the city, count the employees and do the math.

The 1990s and early 2000s were a golden age of large-scale sculpture, installation, and video projection. Chelsea's blue-chip and mega galleries—carved out of former garages and warehouses—are relics from this slightly less unaffordable era. Founded by baby boomers when real estate was more accessible, the most power-

ful American galleries won a generational lottery. America's art world, like its government, is a gerontocracy captured by boomers. And as in all other areas of American life, the art world's boomers have worked hard to pull the ladders up behind them, leaving the generations that follow with less. Many of these galleries own their buildings in Manhattan, allowing them to operate from a comparatively safe position. They can also usually count on sales of works by their established, blue-chip artists and secondary-market deals. This gives them the potential ability to take risks that younger galleries cannot. Unfortunately for artists born after 1980, their rosters are already full, their exhibition slots filled by older artists. The largest galleries bide their time and skim off the cream of the crop, harvesting a successful younger artist or two from emerging galleries each year. Those fortunate few are artists whose careers are usually developed at great financial risk by young galleries that are unable to fully capitalize on their success. As their most financially successful artists leave for boomer galleries, Gen X or millennial galleries are left without any possibility of growing or competing with their elders.

Other gallery expenses that contribute to today's conservative and risk-averse programming include shipping and crating costs, art storage (real estate again), the cost of build-outs and material for building walls, etc., all of which have exploded since March 2020. The cost of shipping artwork is often three or four times the price in 2019. The cost of off-site art storage in and near New York City has also ballooned, making it less attractive for galleries, collectors, and even major museums to support sculpture. The art-storage company UOVO, founded by real-estate developers who are also art collectors, charges $11 per square foot for climate-controlled storage in New York with generator backups that can last two weeks in the event of catastrophe. In 2024, the director of a major New York art museum told me that the museum was no longer collecting sculpture because they'd run out of room in their storage facilities. While the costs of exhibition-specific temporary architecture in galleries are often lower than in museums,[7] they are still substantial. Exhibitions of paintings, which are easier to sell and require minimal or no reconfiguration of the gallery's architecture, are the inevitable result. The number of gallery exhibitions in New York focused on sculpture and video has plummeted since 2020.

Art Fairs

It is impossible to look at art galleries without also looking at the art fairs in which galleries have to participate and on which they depend for a substantial share of their income. Renting an art-fair booth can cost in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Safely transporting artwork across oceans by boat or by air can be

7. Galleries often play fast and loose with building codes and regulations and are under less scrutiny from the fire department than are public institutions.

similarly expensive. Galleries must also ship their staff out to work the fairs. And it's all for nothing if collectors aren't in the mood to buy the art that the gallery has brought. What's to guarantee that collectors won't get bored with a gallery's program and move on to the new year's next flavor? And even if clients stay faithful, what's to guarantee that sales will be sufficient to offset the costs of doing the fair in the first place? Though they may sell high-priced artworks, emerging galleries often survive on a knife-edge owing to their high overhead. A lean year with two or three consecutive bad fairs can sink a young, over-leveraged gallery.

After speculatively binging on painting during and immediately after the pandemic, the world's rich are now buying less art in the primary market, and the art industry is in recession again. This is not because the wealthy have run out of money. During the pandemic, they came to control an even larger share of the world's wealth, siphoning up the new money printed by governments for fiscal stimulus. The collective pullback among collectors is more likely linked to the plummeting secondary-market values of all the painting they bought over the past five years. More than one art dealer I've spoken with has suggested that collectors feel they've been taken advantage of and that the prices for art have gone too high. Partly, this escalation in the prices of paintings was driven by the speculative bubble, but the overall dramatic increase in the prices of art in the primary market also owes much to the never-ending rise in gallery overhead associated with running a business in New York and participating in art fairs. One of the dealers I talked to thought that collectors might be waiting for the current cohort of galleries to close (and overpriced artists to go under) in the hopes that they'll be replaced in an industry-wide reset by a new crop of scrappy young galleries with low-priced art. Good luck with that.

Art fairs were not a primary venue for the presentation of ambitious new artwork in the postwar period. The work brought to fairs was work that hadn't sold in exhibitions. Or it was backroom work, never intended to be shown in exhibitions at all. Merch. The Armory art fair's forerunner, the Gramercy International, originally took place in hotel rooms at the Gramercy Hotel with art dealers sitting on beds surrounded by their wares. In their twenty-first-century incarnation, art fairs have been sold as a new kind of exhibition space, festival malls showcasing and selling hot new art. Along the way, because of how lucrative they have become and because of the concentration of patrons present, fairs have achieved a new degree of seriousness in the eyes of all the participants. And yet art fairs *are* trade fairs, not exhibitions. At fairs, the art is presented in the same kind of prefab booths that appear in all business convention centers—whether showcasing toys, electronics, pornography, or high-end wristwatches. Art fairs are the most conservative venue for presenting and selling art. They are unapologetically commercial. They are the private showroom normally hidden behind a sliding door in the gallery's office now routinely exposed for everyone to see under bright fluorescent lights.

The influence of art fairs on galleries and the exhibitions they mount cannot be overstated. Art-fair booths and gallery exhibitions in New York look very similar

in a post-pandemic world: degraded and risk-averse. Gallerists must now take the same basic consideration into account in both gallery and fair programming: What is the most cost-effective kind of art to show? What pays the rent and keeps the staff paid? These economics foreground the bottom line rather than larger concerns around what art should be, what it could become, and what its relationship is to society. In late December 2023, in a public conversation with the writer Dean Kissick at the Financial District bar T.J. Byrnes, former gallerist Gavin Brown described how the collectors who supported all the visionary, experimental art had been priced out by skyrocketing art prices. At the prices that sustain New York galleries today, most of the collectors who can afford to buy art are first and foremost investors, rather than philanthropic patrons of the arts. As the remaining old-school gallerists pass away with the rest of their generation, all that will be left at the highest levels is art as a business, which is to say art governed by sales metrics. The art that remains is a combination of speculative investment and luxury décor. In a private conversation in 2024, I asked another dealer what kind of art was doing well at fairs and in gallery shows in the wake of October 7. His response? "Whimsy."

Museums/Institutions

Prior to the pandemic, institutional validation led to market success. Curators identified the meaningful art of their time and wealthy patrons supported it by funding museum shows and acquiring it for their private collections. No longer. Following the pandemic, the art that the American art market supports has strongly diverged from the art that institutions exhibit. For sculptors, photographers, and artists working with the moving image or new media, having prestigious museum exhibitions in the US no longer guarantees financial success or a stable living. This has accelerated over the past two years as collectors have abandoned the politically charged art about identity recently championed by institutional curators. Where does this leave American artists? The fees that institutions pay are honoraria, based on the assumption that work in museum shows will be sold by dealers. Many curators and museum administrators are completely unaware of just how serious the crisis in the art market is, and they continue to expect the artists they work with to simply donate their time, labor, and art. The almost total dependence of most exhibiting artists on private patronage means that if collectors aren't buying work by artists showing in museums, those artists emerge from such shows only with debt.

Museums and not-for-profit institutions are capable of raising mountains of money through capital campaigns to fund the construction of new buildings and new wings. While it's prestigious for patrons to put their names on architectural follies, it is less glamorous to fund general operating expenses. In spite of how much money art institutions raise, they still struggle to cover day-to-day operations in New York and LA. The three-month museum exhibition has been replaced by

shows that can last from four to nine months. Fewer exhibitions means that opportunities are even scarcer and more competitive for American artists. The increased costs of shipping and build-outs after the pandemic have also left institutions less able to mount formally ambitious exhibitions of experimental art. Mounting shows of moving-image work, for instance, requires many more days of build-out and installation than exhibitions of paintings. Video shows often require the construction of dedicated soundproofed galleries and architectural light locks at the entrances that keep outside light from spilling in, as well as time to install projectors and monitors and to snake electrical and audio-video cables through walls. After exhibitions come down, the increased cost of storage also means that museums are less likely to buy the work they show, making it even harder for artists to support themselves and to produce experimental sculpture and media work.

On a scale even grander than that of Chelsea's galleries, America's major art museums have built exhibition spaces that are like minimalist cathedrals, with vast, white-walled, column-free galleries and extravagantly tall ceilings. These volumes were intended for large-scale sculptures and video installations or to be broken up into exhibition-specific architecture. They were conceived for artists like Richard Serra, Olafur Eliasson, Pipilotti Rist, Sara Sze, and Carsten Holler. But as mentioned, few younger American artists now work at this scale. And yet, when curators consider artists for institutional projects, they ask themselves whether the artists will be able to meet the challenge of exhibiting in their spaces. Emerging American artists are caught in a vicious circle of risk aversion, in which institutional curators and bigger galleries wait to see if the artists will develop practices and projects that will fit into their large spaces while at the same time denying them access to the very spaces in which these kinds of practices could develop—spaces where artists can experiment with working at scale. This denial occurs out of public view, as part of the curatorial process, when curators decide that the artists they are considering for projects aren't ready to take on larger spaces and opportunities—because the curators have never seen them work in large-scale spaces. Instead, younger artists from abroad, operating with much lower overhead, are brought in to make artworks and exhibitions that are less expensive to produce, thereby mirroring conditions of neoliberal capitalism at large in the globalized economy. Outside the United States, emerging artists in cities like Brussels and Istanbul and Bogotá start out with larger, more affordable studios than New York artists and are given shows in large *Kunsthalle* spaces at much younger ages, allowing them to produce the old kind of contemporary art.[8] Meanwhile, the practices of a generation of young American artists wither on the vine, slowly stunted by New York's real estate.

8. Up until very recently, Berlin would have also been on this list—but the German capital's rents and cost of living are now comparable to those of New York and Los Angeles.

Class and Generational Wealth

In the United States, there is no meaningful state support for artists. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) stopped making direct grants to individual artists in the 1990s in the wake of political controversies. After that, federal funds went to organizations and institutions, some of which are grant-giving organizations. Relative to the number of artists in the US, there are very few direct grants available to them—certainly not enough for a significant number of them to support themselves long term without other sources of income. This leaves three ways that American artists can support their art practices. The first is to be born rich: Artists with generational wealth don't have to work as hard to support themselves and can afford to take risks in their work that others can't. After all, if your family buys you an apartment, you don't have to worry about ending up on the streets if a gallery show doesn't sell. The second is to have a job, whether as a professor or outside academia. A job that can support a studio and an apartment in New York City will leave very little spare time for making art, however. The third way of supporting an art practice is to sell art, which must always be regarded as a minor miracle. Only a minuscule number of American artists have been lucky enough to coax long-term, consistent support out of the market.

Any conversation about New York City real estate and how it shapes the art of our time must confront class and race. Artists from poor, working-class, or middle-class backgrounds tend to be excluded thanks to New York's high rents and cost of living. Artists of color coming from lower-economic-class backgrounds, especially Black, Indigenous, and Latino artists, whose families were historically excluded from the generational wealth creation during the New Deal boom years from which their white peers benefited, are also filtered out. Their ideas, concerns, and perspectives are filtered out at the same time.

These structural filters also exclude aspiring curators or gallery workers who are unable to afford the poorly compensated entry-level positions in a city with some of the highest rents on Earth. In their absence, a cohort of young, wealthy, or upper-middle-class graduates of prestigious schools are able to climb the ladder without them. Discreet help from their families—never discussed publicly—with groceries, credit-card bills, rent or home ownership, etc., allows these fortunate candidates to accept jobs that others without this support cannot. Familial assistance both ameliorates the sting of New York and Los Angeles rents while at the same time exacerbating them and perpetuating gentrification. While museums have worked hard to diversify their programming and their staffs over the past decade, the results of this structural filtration can still be clearly seen in the demographics of commercial-gallery staffs and in the upper echelons of institutions, which are still overwhelmingly white. Given these conditions, it should come as no surprise that there has been almost no discussion of class-based forms of discrimination in the American art industry whatsoever.

Why do we see so little art about class at a time when America's class divisions are roiling the country? Considering how central Marxist thought is to the theorists whom many artists and curators look to, why are there so few exhibitions about class in the country's major museums? One answer is that the concepts for exhibitions that occur to curators from an upper-middle-class background—who have never watched their family members struggle financially—are profoundly different from those that occur to people from lower-income backgrounds. Their experiences inform their priorities. Regardless of their familiarity with the writings of Karl Marx, the ideas and concerns of artists who hail from upper-middle-class and wealthy backgrounds will be different from those of artists who grow up less economically privileged. If art is a reflection of its society and its time, the scarcity of American art dealing with class in the early-twenty-first century—a second, more extreme, gilded age—speaks volumes. In the 2000s and 2010s, it can also be asked why there was so little work made and exhibited by American artists—especially young American artists—about the United States' forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the class divides that shape the US military, in which very few upper-middle-class and wealthy Americans serve, and the class discrimination and filtration discussed in this essay, this absence becomes more understandable. How many people working in the art world of the time, as artists or art workers, knew a single person serving in Iraq or Afghanistan?

The role of America's celebrated art schools—with their BFA and MFA programs and six-figure tuition prices—in creating the conditions discussed here and the resulting conservative, market-oriented art should not be ignored. Art programs at Yale, Columbia, NYU, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, ArtCenter College of Design, CalArts, and RISD—to name some of the most prestigious—are powered by student debt. While many artists who attend these programs are wealthy, others take out crushing loans in order to develop their practices and pursue their dreams of launching a career. In the case of schools in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, etc., the cost of an arts education is further inflated, again, by the rents and costs that students incur by studying in these places.

The number of MFA programs has mushroomed over the past two decades, and so has the number of people graduating from them. This supercharges competition and precarity in the art industry and within academia. A torrent of MFA-bearing graduates has sprayed out of these schools, aimed at an ever-dwindling number of opportunities within the American art industry and at an equally small number of available teaching positions. For many of these artists, their student debt merges with the economic realities of New York and LA, driving a calculated, soulless pragmatism around the art they make. Faced with student-loan payments, Brooklyn rents, and all the other costs of keeping up appearances, it's no wonder that so many American artists rushed to supply the glut of market-oriented paintings that powered the speculative bubble between 2020 and 2023.

Alternatives

In the second half of the twentieth century, American artists also had to put in their time in the art world's capital. Rents and the cost of living were dramatically lower, though, and did not represent a barrier to entry for emerging artists who didn't come from money. The cost of attending art school was dramatically lower. Boomer artists—who were young in the 1970s and '80s—love to tell stories about how, in New York, working two or three days a week waiting tables or bartending, they were able to afford an apartment, a studio, equipment to make video art, say, and enjoy New York's hedonist nightlife, all without art sales. Since there was direct government support for American artists at the time, it's possible some of them were also partially supported by NEA grants. In their lofts, studios, and artist-run spaces, two generations of very fortunate artists turned art upside down over and over again, reinventing and revolutionizing it in the endless free time that the era's low rents made possible. The list of major American artists who emerged during this time who came from poor, working-class, or middle-class backgrounds is a long one in comparison to those who have emerged since 2000. I asked curators, art historians, and other artists to help me make a short list of American artists from the postwar period who didn't grow up with wealth, and here are some of the most recognizable and consequential: Ruth Asawa, Jon Baldessari, Mark Bradford, Bruce Connor, Willem de Kooning, Thornton Dial, Coco Fusco, Nan Goldin, Jack Goldstein, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Dan Graham, Philip Guston, David Hammons, Jenny Holzer, Peter Hujar, Mike Kelley, Barbara Kruger, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Agnes Martin, Allan McCollum, Ana Mendieta, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O'Grady, Raymond Pettibon, Adrian Piper, Jackson Pollock, Yvonne Rainer, Faith Ringgold, Martha Rosler, Betye Saar, Richard Serra, Jim Shaw, Clyfford Still, Paul Thek, Andy Warhol, Lawrence Weiner, Jack Whitten, Fred Wilson, David Wojnarowicz. How many well-known artists born after 1975 with similar class origins can you name?

The structural conditions in New York City that have transformed the art world into the art industry are largely beyond the power of artists to change. Artists will not be able to lower the value of real estate in Manhattan, Brooklyn, or Los Angeles. Nor will they be able to alter the tax regime in a place like New York that makes it more lucrative to leave vacant commercial real estate empty than to rent it at lower prices. They can boycott expensive grocery stores, restaurants, and bars, and they can forgo designer clothes, but they will not be able to lower the fundamental cost of living in New York City, which is driven by the high rents and high cost of doing business.

What can America's artists do? One possible solution could be for young artists to flee New York's sinking ship for Philadelphia or another more affordable city. In a system that divides artists, places them in ruthless competition with one another, and suppresses collectivity, imagining and implementing new forms of solidarity is a challenge worth accepting. The answers will not come from profes-

sors or curators or gallerists or even this essay. Every time art has been renewed or reimagined since the onset of modernism, it has been the result of young artists' taking matters into their own hands. Just because solidarity and collectivity are almost impossible on a large scale in New York City doesn't mean that they aren't possible somewhere else. While New York's romantic, bohemian past offers limited guidance about what a more hopeful future for American art might look like, there are other compelling models worth considering.

One lies in the decentralized underground American music scenes of the 1980s and '90s, which spread out across the country as bands in the indie rock, hardcore, noise, and riot grrrl scenes went on tour, venturing out from their bases in places like Olympia, Washington, DC, Providence, Chapel Hill, Richmond, and San Diego, among so many others. House music and techno, too, were originally centered in Detroit and Chicago but then spread far and wide. Underground hip-hop scenes could be found all over the US in cities like San Francisco, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, Houston, and Atlanta. All of these communities prized authenticity and viewed *selling out* as a great evil. The value systems espoused in the music they produced and in the lives they lived resembled those of the visual artists of the 1960s and '70s, who, based in places with low rents and a low cost of living, felt little pressure to compromise their art in order to make it marketable. They were accountable only to one another and to their communities. That was enough. What mattered was whether your friends liked what you were doing, whether your scene would support you. So too was it with the underground musicians of the '90s. They would pass through Manhattan on tour but happily return home to college towns and regional cities that felt just as vital and cool to them and their fans—if not more so—than downtown New York.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a scene of artists and artist collectives emerged in Providence—mostly graduates of RISD and Brown—all of whom were involved in the local noise-music scene. One of the centers of this scene was Fort Thunder, a massive warehouse converted into lofts and art studios. Members of Providence's music and art scene graduated from school and moved across the country to cities large and small, helping build a network of DIY artist-run spaces that supported artists from their community, giving them exhibitions and in some cases selling their work. A few artists from the larger national scene that Providence was a part of were briefly embraced by the art world: Marcel Dzama, Margaret Kilgallen, Barry McGee, Takeshi Murata, Claire Rojas, and the collectives Forcefield and Paper Rad, to name just a few. But even now, after the market and the curators have lost interest in most of them, these artists and their distributed communities are still doing their own thing, on their own terms, all across the country.

Outside the US, there is the example of Indonesia and its radical, utopian art collectives—like Ruangrupa, Serum, GUDSKUL, Taring Padi, Survive!, KUNCI, Rwwanua, among so many others. In Indonesia, there is even less government funding for art than in the United States. The country's art market is obviously a

tiny fraction the size of New York City's, leaving Indonesian artists and art collectives to figure it out DIY style. Many are based in Jogja (Yogyakarta), a cheap, affordable, beyond laid-back city that is home to an art school. Some of the artist-run spaces have opened small cafes or sell drinks at openings in order to generate income to pay for rent and programming—which is possible in a city where you are not competing for rental real estate with the children of America's upper-middle class and the world's billionaires. Visiting Jogja, the center of Indonesia's art world, is like tunneling back through time to Olympia or Providence in the 1990s. Jogja's scene is run by artists and punks, not by art dealers or professional curators, and the majority of its exhibition spaces are run by artist collectives. Jakarta, with its high rents, is a six-hour train ride away. Indonesian artists based in Jogja or in the countryside are rich in free time, and they piece together the money for rent and art the way New York artists once did in a cheaper era. They have endless opportunities for *nongkrong*—for hanging out—and for the kind of free-form discussions that can lead to formal and conceptual breakthroughs in art. In Indonesia, artists are creating their own networks, institutions, and exhibitions on their own terms. They are able to engage with and make commitments to the actual communities in which they live and work.

The global art world got a taste of this radical Indonesian alternative at Ruangrupa's Documenta 15 in 2022, which was controversial and much misunderstood in Germany (and by many American art critics). It presented a living proposal for what an alternative, utopian art world might look and feel like. Ruangrupa invited other collectives from Indonesia and from around the world, primarily from the Global South, to collaborate with them on curating the exhibition. The collectives both showed their own work and invited other artists and collectives from their communities to show work or participate. In Documenta 15's aftermath, a strong network now stretches across the Global South of artists who are reimagining what contemporary art could be. Ruangrupa are currently developing tools that would allow Indonesia's artists to decentralize even further, networking together artists based in the countryside, far from the economic pressures of urban life.

Closer to New York City, a growing number of artists exhibiting domestically and internationally are now based in Philadelphia: Black Quantum Futurism, Alex Da Corte, Michelle Lopez, Tionna Nekkia McClodden, Wael Shawky, Akeem Smith, and occasionally Carolyn Lazard, among many others. While these artists are in no way a "scene"—and in some cases don't even know one another—they do partake of Philly's relatively cheaper rents and cost of living, which can be one-third or one-fourth of what artists pay in New York or LA. It's no coincidence that all of them work in sculpture and installation. Philadelphia, with its seemingly endless supply of empty industrial warehouses and factories, is a fantasy world of possible studio space. Without a burgeoning tech industry or creative economy—day jobs in advertising, fashion, film and television, publishing, etc., are few and far between—and perhaps because of its proximity to New

York, there are inherent limits on how much Philly can gentrify. A city like Philadelphia, which is less than an hour and a half from New York by train, offers another path for American artists who aren't ready to walk away from the system to leave New York's costs behind. They can massively raise their quality of life while still operating in the industry.

The city of New York, with its impossible costs, has become inimical to the interests of all but the wealthiest of artists. Older artists may have a job that keeps them there, or a partner with a job tied to the city, or children in school. They may run a studio and have responsibilities to employees. For middle-aged, mid-career artists (like me) and older artists in late career, it is difficult to abandon everything—friends, support networks, a life built over decades—and start from scratch, and yet we may need to as the art industry and its commercial galleries, museums, and schools increasingly fail to support us. Young artists at the beginning of their careers, especially those who haven't put down roots in New York, don't have any of these hooks in them yet. Nothing prevents young artists in the United States from seeking ways to free themselves and their art from the increasingly stifling and sclerotic confines of a moribund art world based in a lethally expensive global financial center.

New York City itself now constitutes a core problem in American art. The answers for younger artists are likely not in New York and not in the American art industry, for which the art of the present and the art of the future are not as important as the art of the past.

For all these reasons, New York no longer deserves the ambitions and ideas of the country's young artists. They should stop fighting to give them away to an industry and to a city that no longer care about art except as a means to make some quick money or generate some fleeting attention before moving on. They should stop fighting for the scraps left over from older generations who have shut them out. All through this essay, I've laid out the reasons artists are required to be in New York in order to start and build a career, but they have become a lie. For millennial and zoomer artists they are certainly a lie. New York once offered the possibility of launching careers, but the number of artists for whom the city's promises come true has been diminishing for decades. What do young artists based there receive in exchange for working endless hours at a demanding day job, sacrificing in order to have an art studio, and hustling at openings? After the pandemic, the answer appears to be diminished horizons and expanding precarity. The communities, movements, breakthroughs, and careers that New York once supercharged are now blocked by it. American artists need to move on from the downtown dreams of the late twentieth century and move forward.

In abandoning these now impossible fantasies of art stardom and financial success—and letting go of dreams of showing in New York galleries and museums—artists could win enormous freedom and possibility. There is nothing to stop young, ambitious American artists from de-centering New York—divesting from its grind—and building new communities and new kinds of art on their own terms,

literally everywhere else. There is no reason artists in America's regional cities need to be isolated. Through the Internet, artists could connect with one another and develop new distributed dialogues and debates about what American art can be in the twenty-first century. It's already taking shape in online groups like Do Not Research. In more-affordable cities, artists can secure space and time in which to find a way out of New York's dead end. Away from New York real estate's crushing gravity, there's the possibility of creating new artist-run curatorial projects and exhibition spaces that center the living artists of the present and the art of our time. Such a move would also reorient artists away from global power and towards their own societies. Why waste time trying to turn New York's art museums and galleries into community centers? Midtown isn't a community. The Meatpacking District, West Chelsea, Hudson Yards, and Tribeca aren't communities. Manhattan is a grid of luxury real-estate assets. America's young artists could return to the very real communities from which they come and build new, sustainable art worlds centered on the needs, dreams, and desires of artists. Perhaps new dialogues with those communities and new ways to serve them through art would be possible as well if American artists exit New York's glistening bubble of filthy wealth.

While it's not sexy to look behind the scenes—behind the world of ideas, forms, and gestures—at the grade B, C, and F sausage factories in which today's contemporary art is made and processed—it's essential if you care about art as something more than speculative financial décor for oligarchs or as tame, tepid instruments in the service of institutional fundraising. For those of us sincerely committed to lives in art and interested in the future of art in America, the time has come to move beyond institutional critique to industry critique and, after that, to search for solutions. For American artists at the beginning of their careers, the challenge is nothing short of imagining and building a new art world and reclaiming the agency that has been stolen from them.