

Resist the List: A Problem of Politics in the Evaluation of Contemporary Art

by Charlene Lau

“Could it be that contemporary art *is* neoliberalism in its most purified form?”

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle, editorial in *e-flux* journal #21

With Top 10 lists, Power 100s, “must-see” shows and end-of-the-year lists, contemporary art discourse is rife with bite-sized amounts of art criticism. This ranking of artists, collectors, curators, dealers and anyone else who has a hand in shaping contemporary art has become the accepted norm for disseminating easily-digestible servings of the haves and have-nots. The *Fortune* 500 or any *Forbes* lists immediately come to mind, where rankings reflect net worth. Is it a coincidence that these “rich” or “power” lists are seemingly models for the lowly art list? The increasing number of lists in critical art discourse is a symptom of art criticism in crisis, an art criticism “lite” that is rarely substantiated and often championed by the short attention span of social media and the Internet.¹ As Julian Stallabrass argues in *High Art Lite*, contemporary art’s bedfellowship with commerce prevents any “meaningful judgement” from being proffered.² In this way, lists truncate or eliminate the physical and theoretical space traditionally allotted to substantiate criticism, whether negative or positive. Rather than elaborate on an argument or a critical judgement, lists employ a methodology that is contemporaneous to the digital age and the Internet. Boris Groys has discussed his concept of binary code of “zero or one, mentioned or not mentioned”³ in relation to the value ascribed to art. Similarly, lists demonstrate a behaviour whereby critical judgements are reduced to atomized packets of information; they dictate trends rather than promote analysis and evaluation.

At first glance, the *ARTnews* 100 suggests that it is a list covering the whole contempo-

rary art scene; beyond the ambitious title, it becomes blindingly clear that it is a list of collectors. The title of the accompanying article to the 2012 directory reads like a gauche self-help book: “How to Make a \$119.9 Million Bid.” Although there are no numbered rankings, collectors are listed along with the source of their wealth (banking, hedge funds, inheritance, real estate and the like), and their collecting speciality (Chinese antiquities, contemporary, modern, Old Masters). The list functions more like a calling card, a who’s who for dealers or aspiring art stars to identify with whom they should be currying favour. Two questions initially arise: upon what criteria is this list based? And what have collectors done within art to receive this standing? Is there more depth to these exercises than that they are lists of those who acquired the most or the most expensive art? If so, none of this is evident or presented to the reader. As such, groupings like this one seem to bear few criteria beyond net worth. Contributions to philanthropy or broader volunteerism within the art system are not reflected.

ArtReview’s annual Power 100 is perhaps the most evocative art list, openly displaying the machinations of neoliberal capital in contemporary art. The numbered list ranks artists, collectors, critics, curators, museum directors and art dealers (or “gallerists” as the publication euphemistically terms them). Upon closer analysis, dealers, collectors and museum directors comprise the majority of the list. In present terms, those who hold the reins in the circulation of global capital in the art world are best represented. Unsurprisingly, artists

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constitute fewer than twenty percent of the list. And those listed are the usual suspects: Ai Weiwei (3), Gerhard Richter (6) and Cindy Sherman (13) are the only three artists in the top twenty. The likely reason is that such artists function like brands: their work is instantly recognizable and has high symbolic value that translates into market value. Specifically, Ai is a symbol of the struggle against a corrupt regime; his high position on the list (which was criticized by the Chinese government) indicates the championing of freedom over state oppression. To give the rankings validation, three spots were allotted to theorists: Boris Groys (61), Slavoj Žižek (65) and Jacques Rancière (92). This inclusion appears to be an afterthought, both obligatory and ornamental; their presence on the list gives it the appearance of intellectual and critical rigour. The remaining 78 spots are comprised of "players" in the game of capital, those who either have wealth or who have the networks to access wealth. The term "power" in the title distinctly refers to economic heft, rather than the capacity to produce or examine art.

It is interesting to note that *ArtReview* served more as a lifestyle and society magazine before its relaunch in 2006 when it was branded "International art and style." The social feature "Party," which contained names and faces, was replaced by "On the Town," a section that lasted until partway through 2012. Despite this, *ArtReview* has not fully severed ties with its prior incarnation; in fact, reminders of its past are evident in the March 2013 issue featuring a list of "Future Greats" in the contemporary art world. For instance, the list of young up-and-

comers was underwritten by EFG International, a global private banking group. While it is important to support emerging artists, they are easy to exploit due to their economic precariousness; the potential is to be the "hot new thing," the soon-to-be stars driving the market onwards and upwards. Young blood is required to keep the celebrity star system churning out more objects (read: subjects) of desire. Lists play upon the sycophantic imaginary of contemporary art, where the publicity machine seeks to gain advantage in naming the stars of the culture industry whilst pitting its players against each other in competition. As a function of neoliberal economic ideology, competition is naturalized while inequality is the unfortunate, yet inevitable secondary result.⁴

Other lists of emerging artists bring into question the effectiveness of selection processes. A close look at *BLOUINARTINFO's* "Canada's Top 30 Under 30" reveals its inherent lack of diversity. The list is not representative of the diversity of a country that considers itself a cultural mosaic. It is a grievous oversight, a reality in which criticality plays no part. In response to this "controversy," the editor admitted to not "thinking politically" and "not consciously seeking a diverse swatch of representatives."⁵ It is a clear indication that the function of discourse has shifted from a concern with constituent politics to wielding favour. A further demonstration is its limited geographic scope, with the vast majority of entries residing in Toronto.

Artforum's end-of-year "Best of..." lists for film, music, books and art allow for some justification, but not very much. The film and

music lists by John Waters, Amy Taubin and John Cale adhere to the standard format, with short explanations for each position, whereas critics like Thomas Crow, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh and Claire Bishop contribute short essays on the "best" art exhibitions. Perhaps this illustrates *Artforum's* uneasy position within neoliberalism and the market, and the more critical and alternative mode of discourse from which it originated.

More critically-minded publications rank actual content, such as exhibitions and events, rather than art world personalities. The list functions as a promotional vehicle, and people are marketable celebrities promoted as such; the artworks are merely a means to that celebrity. A position on a list is a reward for one's work and an indication of symbolic value; any PR is a replacement for future market value and, ideally, monetary remuneration. One only has to think back to October 2012 when Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev made an off-the-cuff remark at an Artists Space lecture, stating that artists invited to exhibit at Documenta do not receive payment: "If you were an artist, you didn't get any money, no, because you were already invited to the exhibition...."⁶ Christov-Bakargiev implies that the prestige of exposure provided by such an international art event suffices as exchange for the production of art and its related costs.

With lists, things can no longer just be good, they must be the very best.⁷ Superlatives proliferate and hyperbole is king. The affirmative nature of lists conveniently sees that no feelings of those who went unmentioned are

explicitly hurt. As Isabelle Graw argues, to criticize an artwork is to criticize the artist personally, for network capitalism demands that we all get along with one another for fear that our networks will collapse and we will experience what Diedrich Diederichsen calls certain "social death."⁸ Just what exactly are the criteria for these lists? How does one rank an artist against a dealer against a theorist? They do not have the same function in the art world, nor are those functions easily quantifiable. Market capitalism attempts to enumerate a person's effectiveness in order to ascribe a market value.

BLOUIN ARTINFO is a curious creature, self-confessed as the "Premier Global Online Destination for Art and Culture." A glance at the website demonstrates the perplexing hodgepodge of content bursting out of this massive enterprise. Subject headings for the visual arts, performing arts, architecture and design, and artists sit uneasily alongside tabs on art prices (a section which houses the Blouin Art Sales Index), market news, lifestyle, fashion, events and travel. Amidst the jumble, further probing locates the Blouin Boutique, where potential collectors can purchase or bid on \$30,000 wines, vintage cars, fine art, homes, antiques and fashion objects. It is a one-stop shop where art criticism, news, market analysis and commerce attempt to merge. This is a contemporary colonialist structure in operation in which the market engulfs autonomous discourse, although one could debate its success.

If the age of neoliberalism sees the increasing omnipresence of market forces in all aspects

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of the social order, then contemporary art and its discourse function alongside the so-called invisible hand of the market that guides them. Self-styled art/media baroness and philanthropist Louise T. Blouin is a case in point. After her divorce from classifieds-ad king John MacBain, Blouin used a portion of her settlement to start the Louise Blouin Foundation in London, and bought up a round of magazines including *Modern Painters* and *Art+Auction*, all of which now reside under the banner of her publishing empire, Louise Blouin Media. In late 2012, the Internet was a flurry with rumours that Blouin was in talks to acquire the Armory Show. As Will Brand wrote sardonically in a post on *Art F City*, "Will Louise Blouin own us all by 2016?" In true market capitalist fashion, Blouin outrightly purchases cultural and symbolic capital. With her global website/brand *ARTINFO*, she attempts to privatize and colonize art news. In dissecting the very name *ARTINFO*, one is led astray — surely this is a place for all news from an organization that disseminates information in the name of the public good? Furthermore, *Modern Painters* has been rebranded as *BLOUINARTINFO.COM*. *Modern Painters*. *Art+Auction* was spared this treatment, for its title already directly speaks to the aims of the market. In so doing, Blouin has effectively subsumed and dwarfed any trace of what autonomy *Modern Painters* had left as a periodical with its roots in British art criticism. What does history matter if global domination can be had instead? Blouin has, in recent years, expanded the *ARTINFO* empire to emerging markets of the so-called Global South including Brazil, India and Southeast Asia. If neoliberalism is a "missionary faith" whereby prevailing markets are broadened and

new markets are formed,⁹ then Blouin succeeds in carrying out her assignment.

How can the increasing involvement of the private sector in contemporary art allow for free and well-informed critique, the very basis of which is to question, investigate and probe the system? Critical discourse is stifled when it colludes with the market, for with the commodification of contemporary art comes a publicity machine for profit where "hollow cheerleading," as termed by artist-critic Keith Miller, takes the place of strident critique. Lists create a culture of affirmation and are a self-supporting gesture for contemporary art and its market; to do otherwise is to bite the hand that feeds it. In today's political climate, cutbacks to cultural funding and evisceration of government programs for culture pave the way for an uncertain future where critical discourse must, too, be guided by the hand of the market, by the private foundations and their own neo-liberal agendas. As Isabelle Graw contends, the "right to denounce hegemonic value judgments is the right of criticism. Criticism is both associated with market conditions and capable of defying them."¹⁰ Thus, the role of criticism is two-fold: to simultaneously operate within the neoliberal system of contemporary art and its markets, and to dissent from within the confines of that hegemonic ideology. We can be privy to the degradation of criticism, but we never have to be complicit. x

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Endnotes

- 1 I borrow the idea of "liteness" from Julian Stallabrass' discussion of the Young British Artists in *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2006.
- 2 I take this term from critic Daniel Mendelsohn. See "A Critic's Manifesto," *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2012; <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/08/a-critics-manifesto.html>
- 3 Boris Groys in conversation with Brian Dillon, "Who do You Think You're Talking To?" *Frieze*, 121 (2009). http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/who_do_you_think_youre_talking_to/
- 4 Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton, *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, eds. Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 8.
- 5 Sky Goodden, "A Response to the 30 Under 30 Controversy," *ARTINFO Canada*, January 31, 2013; <http://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/862409/editorial-a-response-to-the-30-under-30-controversy>
- 6 "100 Notes — 100 Thoughts: A reflection on DOCUMENTA (13) Notebooks by Avital Ronell, with a response by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev," (lecture at Artists Space, New York, October 18, 2012).
- 7 Neal Gabler, "Everyone's a critic now," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2011; <http://www.theguardian.co.uk/culture/2011/jan/30/critics-franzen-freedom-social-network>
- 8 Isabelle Graw, "Judging — Yes, but How?" *The Power of Judgment*, eds. Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 38.
- 9 Raewyn Connell, "Understanding Neoliberalism," *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, 23.
- 10 Isabelle Graw, "High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture." (lecture at Art Dubai 2012, United Arab Emirates, March 21–24, 2012); <http://vimeo.com/33472517>