



*The Art World of Cosmopolitan Collectors. In Relation to Mediators,
Institutions and Producers*
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This research addresses transformations and processes that have formed the conduct of collectors of western contemporary art and, through them, the art field, as of the end of the 20th century till 2014. This study shows in the first place that the collectors' power has been concentrated in North America and Western Europe. The wealth concentration in the United States, Germany and other Western economies, combined with various fiscal benefits related to owning art in these countries, has been of great significance for creating new collectors there. What turned out to be important as well is the steady and almost uninterrupted tradition of private collecting in these regions, which has secured continuation of certain art historical and social practices and values. These traditions have been supported by strong institutional infrastructures, distribution channels and market structures, which appeared to be interrelated and reinforcing each other. The inclination of North-Western collectors to the North-Western artists, even in time of the worldwide Internet and an accessible global visual language, has been explained by the representational bias, a half-intentional preference for artists who are represented by familiar galleries and shown in known institutions.

That contemporary art has become the most popular art collectible among collectors in the last decade has been explained by several reasons. Next to its comprehensible visual language, its alluring conceptual approach and its actuality, contemporary art offers collectors the opportunity to grow together with artists' careers and promises to collectors a discovery of the "second Warhol," great artists who will become part of art history. Its prices start cheap, its supply is less restricted as is the case with "art classé," while a collector can actively participate in the making of the artistic canon. In comparison to art from other periods, practical problems such as forgery, looting and maintenance are of a lesser concern. For some collectors, feeling the spirit of their own time and actively taking part and responsibility in the creation of their own culture forms an essential motive. However, what contributes to the popularity of contemporary art even more, is the social world it creates, and the financial opportunities it offers.

Collectors feel part of an extraordinary group, a geographically and quantitatively extending social network, which has a very attractive, culturally charged program at its disposal. The attraction of this social world is a joint effort of all actors, such as galleries, public institutions and fairs who create the atmosphere of enjoyment, glamour, miracles and exclusivity. The universal language of collecting promises democratic accessibility to the art world and equality of its members, which in reality, is to a certain extent an illusion. Although the mixing of actors from different social origins happens regularly, collectors are in pursuit of social distinction in relation to those outside the art world but also in relation to each other. Collectors permanently create hierarchies among themselves: showing images of artworks on their iPhones, naming artists from the collections, mentioning invitations to parties and dinners are instruments of distinction. Enjoyment of shared interests goes hand in hand with the wish to differentiate and exclude in order to obtain social prestige and to secure their place in the hierarchy of actors in the same field.

The other very important reason for the current popularity of contemporary art is its financial capacity that can possibly turn collecting into a profitable experience. Although collectors express various attitudes toward art as investment, when an

opportunity of cashing the profit appears, it is often a matter of profit, not of principles to treat a work as a financial asset or not. However, the common interest in the value increase does not make collectors into speculators. In the current collecting enjoyment of owning an artwork goes hand in hand with the pleasure of receiving financial returns. The speculative activity called flipping received a lot of media attention but seems to be a limited phenomenon.

Collectors build their collections using the distribution system based on galleries and auction houses. A good relationship with the gallery is of central importance in order to have access to required works and relevant information on artists, art and the art market. Most collectors emphasize therefore how important galleries' work is in building the careers of artists, and avoid putting their relationship with them at risk by not showing their loyalty or openly criticizing them. Eventual accusations of creating artificial demands, exclusion mechanisms and certain marketing strategies are expressed sporadically and mostly off the record.

Galleries from their side attempt to keep the attention of collectors through expending their geographical network, enhancing their cultural status and organizing social events, which will create collectors' additional commitment. Fairs, which form another variant of buying art from a gallery, have become an important and generally accepted part of the collecting mode in the last decade. While some collectors like the concentration of artists' choice and accessibility to information, others condemn fairs because of the alleged lack of cultural engagement and quality. Nonetheless, collecting contemporary art without participation in fairs has become unthinkable for many collectors, while at the same time being a commercial place contributes to collectors' awareness of the financial value of art. The Internet, so far, did not change the fundamentals of gallery work but complemented the technical modes through which galleries operate.

Another distribution channel form auction houses, which collectors appreciate because of their transparency and the uncomplicatedness of auction procedures. Auctions offer collectors an easy access to works without the social categorizations based on reputation, visibility of the collector and trust relationships that galleries require. However, operating through auction houses can have negative consequences for the cultural and social standing of a collector. While buying artworks through an auction is morally neutral according to the codes of the art world, selling can entail moral condemning because of alleged ruining careers of artists, creating an artificial artistic canon, and driving prices up.

Auction houses operate not only via physical auctions but have been attempting to attract collectors through private sales, curated exhibitions, online sales and various advisory services. Some collectors consider this expansion into the territories of galleries, dealers, curators and art advisors as a too big concentration of power and therefore a threat to the whole system. In order to soften the critique, auction houses emphasize their democratic principle of participation and their cultural involvement by using actors with huge cultural capital for their activities.

When operating in the distribution networks, collectors sometimes involve art advisors, who assure the expertise on art and knowledge of the market by promising neutrality when advising acquisitions or creating a vision about collections. While some collectors think that an art advisor proves lack of a taste of their own, others consider having an advisor as a sign of economic and social capital. Their increasing number could be seen as a sign that collecting is no longer about personal taste but about making the right acquisitions that will keep its financial and cultural value.

When building their collections, collectors operate in the art market and in the sphere of culture, which interests are often considered as conflicting and incommensurable. The ideology of the art field dictates that collectors are motivated by participating in cultural and artistic values and not in financial profits. The art market uses these ethics of collecting to navigate collectors' behavior in order to protect artworks from being treated as any other commodity and to keep the current system of distribution and circulation of art works intact. Two moral imperatives are applied to control collectors' behavior in the art market: a good collector never sells and a good collector buys with his eyes and not with his ears. Gallery owners give collectors who do not resell a moral acknowledgement and preferential treatment in opposition to bad collectors, to whom they refuse access to works. The moral pressure has been, so far, the most effective tool to prevent collectors from reselling, as solid legal agreements are not customary for the art market.

However, the overwhelming majority of collectors resell their works. As selling can result in lack of access to works and a bad reputation, they preferably avoid speaking about it. In case they do, they legitimize their actions by motives that are morally acceptable from the ideology of the art field. Some collectors admit to sell for profit but not openly, whereby others argue that they do not want to keep works in their collections that threaten to lose its value. There are also gradations in moral condemning with regard to the manner in which collectors sell. Giving a work back to the gallery is considered as most proper, while the worst is public selling through an auction. Collectors can disturb galleries' control of prices, supply and demand as their commercial interest becomes stronger than their moral commitment.

Where the first moral code is mostly used to distinguish between good and bad collectors by galleries, the second myth of collector who does not buy with his ears but with his eyes, is used typically to make a distinction between collectors themselves. It addresses the fundamental ideas of collecting: the making of subjective choices and the creation of one's own vision instead of following the rumors. Collectors with a greater cultural capital claim not to need to follow the mainstream preferences and fashions, but are instead able to decide themselves. They reproach all that is connected with the 'ears': fascination with names and brands, the lack of profound information and knowledge and the herding behavior triggered by the possibility of financial profit.

The notion of disinterestedness in relation to money functions as one of the most important distinction marks, especially among long-term collectors versus newcomers, whom they associate with unlimited wealth as opposed to their own financial means. Other points of distinction refer to the way in which they build up a collection where passion, hard working and discipline oppose the temporary fascination and lack of personal involvement. Connoisseurship and the understanding of art serve as an important tool of distinction as they represent a quality that cannot be bought. Collecting is, furthermore, claimed not to be limited only to creating an art collection, but it implies social responsibility for creating culture. As connoisseurship turned out to be a buyable service, passion and responsibility for culture an unreliable criterion, the distinction based on interest in money functions as a solid instrument of categorization.

The pressure of the moral codes proved to have an effect only to a certain extent. It forces collectors to avoid speaking openly about their interest in art as a form of investment, but it does not hinder collectors' interest in the financial value of works and the economic potential of their collections. The study of collectors' preferences at auctions demonstrated that the number of artists whose works were

sold was very low and the number of recurring artists in consecutive years very high. It evidenced collectors' inclination for blue chip artists with a branding quality, which could be seen as choices that guarantee a solid value in the art market. Although the social and cultural values of owning art are of great importance, today's art collectors are highly aware of the financial worth of their works and their potential.

Contemporary collectors follow in the footsteps of earlier collectors who, socially and culturally motivated, decided to share their collections with bigger publics. In the new millennium, the number of private museums is quickly growing. The increasing number of High Net Worth Individuals, who spend part of their expanding wealth on art, makes up the context in which collectors' interest in private places has developed, since private spaces generate costs and mostly no incomes. Collectors who opened a private space combine the pleasure to see the works with the wish to share experiences with the public. They show their personal taste and ideas about what matters to them in art, whereby their museums provide them the opportunity to differentiate, as much as it offers a platform to create a gift relationship and network exchange with other collectors. A physical space such as a private museum allows for the creating of visibility of the collector in the art world as much as in the local community. It offers a platform to develop social activities, such as artistic education and various support programs for artists or the community. Through these morally praised activities, collectors gain social prestige and build their reputation as passionate collectors.

The visibility factor has become nowadays of vital importance, as the art market in the past had smaller dimensions and the competition for works and the need for distinction was less prominent. Private museums are of importance to collectors' positions in the art market since public visibility helps secure access to works and receiving of better prices. Collectors profit from the public exposure of their collections, whereas they contribute to the economic value of an artist by showing their works to the public. Private museums offer a visibility tool to artists, art works and galleries, which, in its turn, builds the social, cultural and financial capital of the collector. The art market profits from the current high value of public visibility, since the latter forces collectors to permanently upgrade and change their collections through new acquisitions and sales.

As activities of private spaces equal, to a certain extent, the work of public museums, a possible struggle for authority urges collectors to formulate their standpoint in this regard. Some collectors stress the importance of the public spaces and express their cooperative, and not competitive, attitude. Others claim being more progressive than public museums, as the latter stayed too much in traditional cultural and administrative structures and cannot react adequately to the transformations in the art world. Public museums defend their position by accusing the private ones of a basic arbitrariness in their responsibilities because they lack obligations for continuity, education and commitment to artistic careers. This struggle for authority became urgent because collectors represent more buying power, can act quickly and attempt to participate in formulating the new artistic canon.

Public museums and collectors know various forms of cooperation, now and in the past. Their relation is reciprocal, as both parties can profit from each other: while the museum needs financial contributions, loans and donations, collectors can upgrade works by making their quality museum-proven and enjoy fiscal advantages. Moreover, cooperation with a public museum adds to their reputation and the prestige of their collections. Because of budget cuts in state funding and the increasing private

wealth, the influence of private collectors is claimed to be growing although this claim has been anecdotally substantiated but not sufficiently quantified.

Collectors are permanently in search of new artists who will fulfill their expectations of artistic creativity, produce high-quality works and, preferably, gain importance in the history of art. At the same time, they seek artists whose works promise a growth not only in terms of artistic but also of financial value; depending on collectors, short or long term. Such artists can be found in all age categories.

The idea that collectors massively switch their attention to young artists has been proved wrong and partially media driven. The analyses of the careers of Oscar Murillo and Phyllida Barlow unveiled certain comparable mechanisms that govern collectors' interest. An artistic talent is often not sufficient to be noticed. What turned out to be of greater significance for collectors is the support for artists from the gatekeepers of the art world: galleries with high reputation, big auction houses, important collectors and celebrated artistic institutions. Each of the gatekeepers offers visibility to an artist and promises to collectors a value increase from the cultural and financial point of view. The examples showed furthermore that interesting narratives, multi-cultural and feminist interpretations related to the personal lives of artists added to their desirability.

Contemporary collectors follow in the footsteps of earlier collectors who socially and culturally motivated, buy art, create collections, share them with bigger publics and enjoy accumulations of cultural and social capital. What distinguishes the social world of today's collectors from the past is that the art world has become more popular, easily accessible and has larger dimensions. Collectors are the driving force of the growth of the contemporary art market, whereby they are not only interested in the cultural and social values of collecting but also in the financial aspect of owning art. The idea of collecting art as a project with delayed gratification has changed into collecting art for the short term satisfaction.