Abstract:
The 21st Century Globalized Artworld: A New Distributed Renaissance

Over the past five years, the international art market and all related cultural institutions have been expanding at an accelerated pace: new gallery concentrations in global cities, continued expansion of art fairs and art biennials, and a global increase in art collectors and museums reveal both an unprecedented level of new economic activity and a new configuration of the global art economy as a networked system. What was once an economy limited to loosely linked clusters in major cities in Europe and the US is now a globally distributed, highly networked economy that lives on real-time information and freely flowing capital. While the art economy follows the laws of asset concentration in global cities, it also follows the flow of capital, goods, and services across national boundaries. We are now living through an international art Renaissance where anyone participating in the artworld becomes his/her own Medici. Centralized art patronage has been replaced by a globally distributed economic system with all levels of financial participation. This paper provides a new view of the global artworld as a social-economic network through my academic research and my professional insider knowledge as a gallery owner and contemporary art dealer. In addition to mapping out the structure of the international art economy, this paper will present findings from my work in progress on the size and economic impact of the global artworld.

The “fine art” sector of the international economy is larger, more interconnected with the larger economy, and more extensive in economic impact than any existing studies of this sector have projected. The gross deficiencies in art market reports and coverage in the business and financial press result from an inadequate model: the neglect of the networked economy model and the omission of valuation methods based on the flow and exchange of cultural and symbolic capital have prevented adequate descriptions of the scope and impact of this new economic system.

The major interconnected nodes of the 21st century artworld are: (1) the commercial art gallery system, (2) the auction house industry, (3) museums and independent “Kunsthalle” exhibition institutions, (4) the art biennials in cities all over the world, and (5) international commercial art fairs. Many art galleries, for example, are international businesses offering a suite of services and kinds of transactions in main networked cities (Beijing, New York, London, Rome, Los Angeles), and are, simultaneously, major participants in the other nodes. There are other important nodes in this network—for example, the multi-tired art services economy (art insurance, legal services, private banking and wealth management), the art media, and the higher education system of art colleges, university degree programs, and academic art professions—which I will discuss elsewhere. At the individual level, professional artists, photographers, designers, art administrators, and curators often move freely among these institutions in ways impossible before the current globally networked structure.

A major indicator of the new globalization of the artworld is the clearly emerging international professionalization of all the leading institutional roles. A museum in Beijing, for example, will now emulate the Western model, and will include an internationally professionalized staff of directors and curators. In the category of “follow the money,” leading art collectors who contribute to the art market are also on museum boards and are donors of money and art works worldwide. The cultural and economic activity of all artworld actors is now performed with a tacit model of international “standard practices” and rules for maximizing fungible art value.
The 21st Century Globalized Artworld: A New Distributed Renaissance: Short Description

Over the past five years, the international art market and all related cultural institutions have been expanding at an accelerated pace: new gallery concentrations in global cities, continued expansion of art fairs and art biennials, and a global increase in art collectors and museums reveal both an unprecedented level of new economic activity and a new configuration of the global art economy as a networked system. What was once an economy limited to loosely linked clusters in major cities in Europe and the US is now a globally distributed, highly networked economy that lives on real-time information and freely flowing capital. While the art economy follows the laws of asset concentration in global cities, it also follows the flow of capital, goods, and services across national boundaries. We are now living through an international art Renaissance where anyone participating in the artworld becomes his/her own Medici. Centralized art patronage has been replaced by a globally distributed economic system with all levels of financial participation. This paper provides a new view of the global artworld as a social-economic network and draws on new data from my academic research and from my professional insider knowledge as a gallery owner and contemporary art dealer. In addition to mapping out the structure of the international art economy, this paper will present findings from my work in progress on the size and economic impact of the global artworld.

Bio

Dr. Martin Irvine has a Ph.D. from Harvard University and has been a professor at Georgetown University for 20 years. He has published widely on many aspects of cultural theory and history, and founded the graduate program in Communication, Culture & Technology at Georgetown University in 1995, where he now teaches graduate seminars on media, visual culture, and the globalization of culture. Dr. Irvine also brings a unique professional perspective to cultural economics and the contemporary artworld as the founder and director of Irvine Contemporary, a leading contemporary art gallery in Washington, DC. A member of many museums and cultural organizations, Dr. Irvine successfully combines his extensive background in cultural history and theory with professional activity in the art economy.

[This draft is for reference only; not for circulation. Part of a book in progress. For further information, contact Martin Irvine, irvinem@georgetown.edu, martin@irvinecontemporary.com]