

1

From January through March of 2012 Damien Hirst staged a takeover of all eleven Gagosian galleries, encompassing eight cities and three continents. The occasion was, well, did this really count as an occasion? Hirst's market-vapid "Dot Paintings" were up in all eleven spaces. Nothing more. The dots didn't connect to anything larger. It was the crudest kind of art world logic.

- A) Damien Hirst is important.
- B) Any exhibition by an important artist is also important.
- C) This was an exhibition that went to eleven, as Nigel Tufnel from *Spinal Tap* would say, so it was important times eleven.

Visitors who attended every one of the franchise's exhibitions received a reward for their globetrotting efforts. This is a bit like McDonald's promotions for collecting a full set of giveaway action figures, mugs, etc, though in this case the prize was a print signed by the artist rather than, say, a free Happy Meal.

But the artificial extravaganza did get Hirst more headlines – he'd gone a longer time than usual without them – while also providing us with more opportunities to see the artist goofily posing in front of his work. I've pulled up a few of these images just now. There's Damien lying on the gallery floor, prostrate in front of a painting. Here he is with an orange knit cap, t-shirt, white sports coat, gold chains around his neck,

and multiple skull rings, looking like a grandfather struggling to hold onto some punker past, a sea of colored dots over his shoulders. Now he's waving as though from a parade float, now he's got his hands on his head wearily like he's surrendering after a prolonged standoff.

And maybe this last one is the most telling of all. Maybe this is a prolonged standoff, one between the artist and the media, between the artist who some accuse of being so media-savvy that it covers up his creative failures and the artist as he really is, a man who would rather be enjoying a dive bar anonymously than standing in front of the world as Damien Fucking Hirst.

2

As a well-known artist once said to me, "In the art world, presence makes the heart grow fonder." He said this rather bitterly, acknowledging that attendance at the weekly grind of galas, openings, parties, dinners, etc was something one simply had to endure to gain, and maintain, art market success.

I think that all of us who exist in the art sphere feel this way from time to time, with some of us feeling it more than others. It's not that the art crowd is full of bad people – some of my closest friends are in that crowd – but it's just that the routinized nature of these events, coupled with the universal understanding that this is "networking" we are all engaged in, tends to keep the social engagements at a

surface level. There is sometimes real love to be found, and felt, but even that is somehow compromised by all the fake “love” that is being tossed around so strategically.⁴³ It is, basically, a microcosm of life in the professionally ambitious spheres of our contemporary urban world. Lots of friends, few deep friendships.

1a

Looking at these images of Hirst – seeing him having already moved past his Bono-glasses-and-haircut phase and into more of an Elton John look – I’m reminded of the press he got at the beginning of his career. Specifically, I’m reminded of a Vanity Fair profile that ran in December of 2000. The piece was written by Nancy Jo Sales and it came soon after the Saatchi-collection “Sensation” show visited the Brooklyn Museum of Art.⁴⁴

The Vanity Fair reporter covered Hirst’s visit to New York City for the opening of his first ever exhibition “without formaldehyde,” an exhibition that took place at Gagosian’s grand West 24th Street space in Chelsea. While we’re calling the recent 11-gallery exhibition an extravaganza, it should be noted that the cavernous

⁴³ Does this partly explain artists’ continued fascination with the confusion between reality and artifice?

⁴⁴ And just for the sake of posterity, let’s note that this was the show that launched at least 1,000 artists’ studios, many of them nearby in Brooklyn. It’s snarling bravado – “fuck you, I’m an artist,” the show screamed – offered an alternative model to much of the cultural production that preceded it. In that sense its impact expanded far beyond visual art.

Gagosian space that has loomed over Chelsea for over a decade was inaugurated with Hirst's 2000 show, and that the inaugural show ran from September 23 – December 16, 2000. It had the length of a museum show, in a space as big as some museums, and it generated museum-like attendance numbers.

Amongst these attendees were lines of viewers waiting in the rain for admittance to the opening night reception, including numerous celebrities, but no sign of Hirst himself until 30 minutes after the event was supposed to conclude. According to the Vanity Fair profile, Hirst – already gray-haired at age 35, just five years into his career⁴⁵ -- made the briefest of appearances with his entourage of family and friends, said a quick hello to Larry Gagosian and Jay Jopling, his two dealers, intentionally offended Martha Stewart when she tried to greet him, then made a quick exit.

The article goes on to chronicle the general misbehavior and mayhem wrought by Hirst and his entourage – a crew of about 50 family members and friends that he'd flown over from the UK – during their stay in New York. There are reports of police and guards posted in the halls of the SoHo Grand hotel, where the crew stayed. There's talk of massive hangovers, of Hirst and his brother waking up one morning on the floor of a dive bar in the Village, of drug use, of break-ups and reattachments

⁴⁵ In an art world full of beautiful people, Hirst has always been, as the article says, “stubby” and not a particularly handsome man.

between Hirst, his longtime partner, and really everyone else in the entourage, of banks that might balk at continuing to raise his credit card limit while he's on this trip, of drunken branding – using pieces of charcoal applied to one's bare, and later infected, skin – and of Hirst being so groggy and seemingly incapable of speech in a public-television interview that Sales described him as looking like “someone in need of medical care.”

Finally, at the end of the article, there's a clearly exhausted Hirst, running on nothing but alcohol and drugs, leaving his crew of hard-partiers behind for a final dinner with “Larry.”

Now, I know what you're thinking. You've seen this self-destructive-artist movie before, right? Vincent Van Gogh cuts off his own ear, Jackson Pollock pisses in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace, Jean-Michel Basquiat wears a paint-splattered Armani suit coat that doesn't quite cover the track marks on his arms. While some who revere Hirst consider a profile such as this one to confirm the artist's rebellious integrity, those who are suspicious of him tend to read it as evidence of Hirst's cynically self-conscious manipulation of both the press and art history. I'd suggest that both factions are right.

2a

Art, from the contemporary market perspective, is not about democracy. Just the opposite is true. The hierarchies that define that market help to maintain a sense of order, an illusion of real rather than arbitrary value. And this seems to be mirrored by an explicit social stratification within the art world. In an art world that is exuberantly, proudly social, the riff-raff still have to be kept out as it seems to be the only way those at the top, and the next tier down, and so on, can know their place in the order of things.

Are these hierarchies good for art? Do they genuinely protect something important, something besides economic and social privilege? Of course not. These hierarchies are irrelevant to art. They exist only to buttress the economic and egoistic concerns of those on the higher rungs of the ladder. Is some art better than others?

Absolutely. Are some people better than others? Only in the sense that some people are more evolved – kinder, wiser, more intellectually adventurous. Do the better works of art and better people naturally rise to the top of the present hierarchy? No. It occasionally happens by coincidence but in general these divisions are much more artificial than anything one might devise based on something like “quality.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Another word that is despised in the art world. And, sure, it can be misused but does its denial not produce similar abuses along different lines?

When we all imagine what art is, at its core, does what we imagine seem consistent with these rather artificial divisions? At its truest, deepest core visual art is a means by which a culture might express its highest consciousness. In terms of the old window versus mirror debate, I come down firmly on the side of the window – a window onto a better world, usually one that looks nothing like the one we inhabit. The mirror argument would tell you that art is a means by which a culture might understand itself. This isn't patently absurd or anything, I just think art is here to do more.

The “culture understanding itself” argument allows one to champion the hyper-capitalist practices of artists like Koons or Murakami. It makes a hero out of Warhol. They present culture in its basest form, a consumerist-oriented, materially driven mass of ego and shiny shallowness. This can provoke important recognitions, but it is not what art does best. The novel does this very well. Film and television do this very well. Even advertising does a good job of self-consciously trading on the fully understood hollowness of our contemporary western, or westernized, society.

Art can do this as well – see the artists mentioned above, and many more – it's just not its core mission. Art is aspirational. This is a common belief in every sphere but the professional art world.⁴⁷ I don't mean that it is materially ambitious, I mean that

⁴⁷ A world which might be said to occupy the center of art production and distribution, but does not convey rights of ownership to Art as a historically significant human enterprise.

it aspires to inspire, that its ambition is to better the culture, and the world, to represent what Wassily Kandinsky called the “inner aspiration” all true artists have towards pointing a better direction forward, not just to be satisfied with its reflection.⁴⁸ Art, music, and poetry all have the ability to transcend language, to go beyond extant bodies of knowledge and to propose, in a direct way, alternatives. Art has the power to show us new worlds, both inner and outer. When art engages in culture-mirroring it tends to “reduce” itself to language – to illustrate concepts that could just as clearly be elucidated linguistically – but its aspirational effects go beyond language.

When art acts as a window in the way I’ve described, it can convey messages we might never have received before and may never again. Messages that shimmer with unnamed, and unnamable, possibilities – possibilities that we only understand if we allow ourselves to disengage from a reliance on our rational minds and provide an opening for our highest consciousness.⁴⁹

Why did the art crowd create these hierarchies and why do we continue to accept them? For at least fifty years the art crowd has been dominated by rationalist atheists who refuse to believe in anything that they can’t logically prove. They certainly don’t believe in a higher consciousness; they certainly don’t believe that

⁴⁸ ADD CITATION

⁴⁹ What Rudolf Steiner might call the “supersensible,” a knowledge that comes to us from beyond the everyday realm of the sensible.

it's possible to transcend the rational mind. Such a sensibility doesn't make one particularly open to the sorts of aspirational art I argue for above.

A complete reliance on rationality is more or less equivalent to saying a complete close-mindedness to anything truly new. The rational leans exclusively on the already known and intellectually digested. It does not venture out into new territory, unless it is to demystify the new by placing it into existing categories.

So, how does a rationalist society operate? It forms hierarchies of understanding, including social understanding. It's the only way it knows. This parallels not only the types of culture-mirroring art mentioned above, but also a culture-mirroring social/economic structure. Ergo, the art world we inhabit today – a precise mirror of the worst elements of a hyper-capitalist society.

What does this do to art and artists? Of course the answer is that it does many things. It valorizes art that is safely rational, that illustrates linguistic concepts cleanly, that traffics in pre-existing, and pre-vetted, ideas. Work of the aspirational variety that was mentioned above is shunted aside, labeled as naïve and/or old-fashioned (a perfectly Orwellian term to describe work that is attempting to speak to the future rather than the present). Artists who work from this perspective are kept on the outside of the hierarchical pyramid.

It also creates an artist class that recognizes – wisely, if they wish to move into the upper reaches of the hierarchy – that schmoozing and social valuation are at least as important to one’s career as the art that one produces. This isn’t a recognition that comes without consequences. Typically, artists find it initially exhilarating. If you show up regularly, shake enough hands, and practice at being charismatic, you start moving up the ladder. You meet lots of interesting people you’d heretofore only read about in art publications. The early rungs are easy to climb if you’re willing to put in the time. Soon, however, thoughtful and soulful artists come to feel that they’re selling out some vital part of themselves, that their social efforts have begun to wade into the territory of the calculated. They pull back.

Those who don’t pull back find themselves conforming to the extroversion that is the dominant personality type in today’s art world. Proficiency in small talk becomes a necessary skill. Patience for, or, better yet, an interest in, such prattle becomes a professional requirement.

And what is the easiest thing to talk about when one is engaged in these shallow social rituals? The fashion choices of one’s conversational partners is high on the list. And these discussions are heard, endlessly, at art openings and parties every day. From there it’s on to the dinner where the food and wine are gushed over, where the conversation then shifts to other restaurants and other dishes, then the restaurant’s interior design becomes a topic to be considered, in a quest to find

more low hanging, low stakes subject matter. Multiply this by hundreds of such experiences and you have an art world in which even once-soulful artists have lost their originality and depth somewhere in the ocean of bland chattiness. The same fate befalls critics, dealers, curators, collectors, consultants, etc, as well.

I'm writing this as though only a fool would choose this path, but make no mistake, this is the path most of us are on. This is not just the most common path, it's also the path of the industry elite. So we fall in line, wisely seeing that this is the road to advancement, always telling ourselves that while we're knowingly giving in to the superficial demands of the industry we are simultaneously maintaining a healthy sense of our true self. For a while we can go in and out of these ways of being in the world, mingling and chatting several nights a week but thinking deeply in our respective creative environments. But this almost never lasts. The preponderance of time spent in the space of shallow thinking and behaving has a corrosive effect on our ability to flip the switch back to authenticity. And besides, the shallow boat seems to move faster than the deep one. If our personal goals consist of traditional art world success, strategic small talk and air kisses are an effective means. Once we learn that sad lesson it's impossible to unlearn it. And once we give into it, which, again, is the rational move, we join a collective class of people who have a vested interest in defending these practices.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Those defenses tend to evoke pragmatics, including tautological statements of the "it is what it is," or "that's how the game is played" variety.

1b

How do we relate this to Hirst? As a rather immediate art star, showing at the massive new branch of one of the highest-profile galleries in the world, the subject of incessant press and personal attention, Hirst was in a position that is more difficult than most of us can imagine. He'd played the game incredibly well for a few years but now he'd come to recognize that the regular schedule of openings and art parties was gradually killing his soul. As he was, at the time, afraid that his career would suffer if he stepped off the carousel completely, he did what any similarly situated artist who was looking to preserve their own self-respect would do – he kept playing the game but did so while intoxicated.

I'm not saying it's a model that we should emulate, but it's a perfectly understandable response. Maybe Hirst had a sense of how his behavior would align him with a lineage of "bad boy" artists, but I don't think this was just a pose. The clowning he did in 2012 in front of that forest of dots, that was a pose. An insincere, patently silly pose, clearly visible to anyone who was willing to see it. The early

career inebriation, on the other hand, I'd go so far as to say that was a sign of personal integrity under attack.⁵¹ It was an attempt at perseverance.

2b

But the message the art world gives most of us isn't about perseverance in the uplifting fashion. Instead it's about gradually selling out a part of one's humanity as a necessity for moving up an artificially constructed social ladder. It's about recognizing the strategic importance of the social sphere of art and amending one's behavior thusly. So while one is selling out one's own humanity one is also de-humanizing others, by treating them as objects to be instrumentalized in the service of one's own career goals.

This situation also explains the fact that the least thoughtful, least soulful individuals tend to have the easiest time moving up that social ladder because they aren't slowed down by moral or ethical misgivings. Which then correspondingly explains

⁵¹ Yes, this "attack" might well be self-inflicted. In playing the game enough to get oneself into this position, one has implicitly supported the social system that one now feels stifled by. This is undoubtedly true but in my opinion it's an incomplete analysis.

why so much contemporary art is thoughtless and soulless. The hierarchy tends to weed certain qualities out, one way or another.⁵²

Lastly, it's important to note that I don't buy the every-creative-industry-does-it-too excuse.⁵³ I don't buy this for two reasons. First, I've spent a lot of time in the film and publishing worlds as well as in the art sphere. In my experience the art world is much, much more schmooze-oriented. Second, so what? This is the defense of a child. Art should be different, right? Certainly it has a different economic structure/process/market. Why can't its social structure be different too (and not in the way it is currently different, in the prioritization-of-schmooze way)?

Every major art achiever will tell you that they're always working, and they are, but this usually means administering their own careers or networking. I was the same way for years. As a grad student I fell into those habits a bit earlier than many of my peers. These days I believe that those peers were ahead of me, having realized in advance that the path I was taking – one lined with wine glasses and formal dinner invitations – was silly and shallow, a shiny tunnel with no light at its end.

⁵² It seems necessary to note here the cozy relationship between art world social practices and some of the more highly prized, in art world circles, theoretical texts of the last several decades. We should not consider it a coincidence that the folks who are willing to give up so much of their own souls in order to climb the art world ladder also find something to recommend in the malaise-inducing, end-of-history, post-soul, post-humanism, post-morality field of “postmodern” discourse. I keep coming back to this because it keeps feeling usefully explanatory.

⁵³ A variation on the we-all-have-a-mortgage-to-pay “yuppie Nuremberg defense” first highlighted in Christopher Buckley's 1994 novel *Thank You For Smoking*.

2c

To be clear: I do not believe that the problematic social world of art that I'm describing came about as part of an evil scheme, nor do I imagine it as a conscious effort to marginalize and homogenize. Just the opposite is true. I believe it was born out of the understandable desires of art thinkers wishing to socialize with one another. This massive art industry that we know today didn't exist forty years ago, or at anything like its current level even fifteen years ago. So artists, critics, dealers, and collectors banded together. They were members of a small group of people with an interest in a field that was well off the popular radar.

They planned after-dinners and parties so as to have opportunities to spend time together. But the art world we now know is probably five hundred times larger – in populace, in annual revenue, in the number of professional institutions – than the art world of twenty years ago. Multiply the social events by that number and it gets pretty hectic. Add to this the constant desire for institutions of all kinds to demonstrate either their admiration for artists and/or to engage in “the-artist-must-be-important-if-the-gallery-booked-an-entire-restaurant-for-their-after-dinner” promotional and sales strategies and the calendar becomes even more booked.

2d

As the industry grew with such rapidity it naturally came to reward qualities like efficient staff leadership, charisma, and negotiating skill from those in its business sector (dealers, museum directors, curators). Travel became a monthly, even weekly, activity. Socializing became constant. The collector class grew but so did the competition for their eyeballs and checkbooks. The market came to advantage the charming administrator type over the contemplative, art-loving connoisseur. This was the result of a simple numbers (which had become so large) and time (which had become so scarce) equation. It was also the result of the fact that as that collector class grew it became less connoisseur-oriented itself. Art is an investment. We've always known it. Over the past ten-to-fifteen years this has been made increasingly explicit.

So, the collector class of today is more investment conscious and less connoisseur-conscious. They are also short-term minded in terms of their investments, echoing the short-term focus in most contemporary investment fields. Work that is regularly flipped today accrues value, typically, with each exchange. This is the opposite of the investment perspective of even fifteen years ago, when art that was sold by a collector who had owned it for less than a decade was seen as somehow tainted.

The savvy art dealer of today – and one has to be savvy just to survive in this market – recognizes these factors and acts accordingly. This impacts the artists the dealer

chooses to exhibit, the ways in which art is contextualized to the public, the press and other contacts that are privileged, and really every other major professional decision they make. In a very real sense the entire professional landscape of the art world is amended to best accommodate these changes in collecting patterns.

And because dealers and collectors are not just part of the art world social scene but are in many ways drivers of it – they often provide the forum for it, or support that forum financially whether it be through art purchases with galleries or donations with museums – the personal, or personnel, transformations they undergo are felt by all in the industry. Moreover, because they are high on the list of folks that artists would like to impress, or remain in the good graces of, they wield a powerful social influence. Artists curry favor in hopes of gaining exhibitions and sales. Curators and museum directors curry favor in hopes of donations and other support. This is not necessarily untoward.

But the impact this has is significant and, over time, detrimental. The top rungs on the business side of the art world are filled with pragmatic, efficient, short-term thinking folks who privilege charm over thoughtfulness. The rungs below attempt to ingratiate themselves with those individuals by, consciously or otherwise, adopting those same qualities. Those who are the most successful at this are accepted into the social club that is that upper rung. Thus the pragmatic, short-term thinking, breezy charmer gains greater and greater dominance as a personality type. Other

personality types are driven to the margins. Not through malice, but through a predictable cycle of rational behaviors that quickly adds up to a massive ideological shift. This shift is more extreme and more impactful due to the predominance of the social component in the art industry.

And so what if we have accidentally driven the oddball, the misfit, the recluse, the misanthrope, out of the art world? For starters, individuals with those characteristics have made some of the most highly regarded work in art history. We are cutting ourselves off from the contrarian thinkers, and the contrarian actors, in favor of a homogenized group of art thinkers who share the same biases and behaviors. It means the loss of a type of art, the loss of art that is made from a certain range of unconventional perspectives.

It also means that many of the players in the art industry, including the artists, are engaged in a practice of “faking it,” socially. They are worming their way into the accepted crowd by taking on certain personal attributes, or playing up their inherent attributes in that direction, and then maintaining or attempting to increase their position in that crowd by doubling and tripling and quadrupling down on these dominant personality traits, on this dominant worldview. Does this have an impact on the art they make? Of course it does. Artists who are not being their true selves make different art than they otherwise would. This kind of inauthenticity seeps into all parts of one’s life. But then many of the other players are also engaging in this

same calculated behavior. They can't afford to see through the masks of those around them.⁵⁴

So we get not only a homogenized and increasingly insulated art world, in terms of worldview, but also an art world whose dominant social pose tends to privilege the inauthentic, the fake over the real, and this then infects not only the art that is made and championed but also the dominant art discourse.

3

Forming a democratic art world is easier said than done. Ideally dealers, curators, critics, and collectors would be traveling at least throughout their own home countries, looking for talent. Obviously this doesn't happen. Art world gatekeepers globetrot incessantly, but their travels rarely take them outside of the 20-25 international art market hubs. Is it even reasonable to ask a U.S.-based dealer, curator, critic, or collector to regularly visit Kansas City, for example, or Baltimore, or Austin, or Bloomington? It probably is not.

An alternative takes us back/forward to the decidedly un-hip, but possibly revelatory, notion of the open submission juried show. We all know that personal

⁵⁴ While making even a reference to the "authentic" immediately suspect. This is another trigger word in today's art industry – a word that cannot be allowed into the discourse unless it is immediately turned into a pejorative.

connections will still be employed here, recommendations made, etc, but the open submission juried show does have the advantage of offering the possibility of discovery, the openness towards the inclusion of artists who would otherwise quite literally be off the art world map. In the U.S. a show like the Whitney Biennial would seem to be a perfect match for the open submission approach. As the show is intended to showcase the best of “American” art from each two-year period, shouldn’t it be curated in an open-call manner?

Of course even the discussion of these principles reminds us that the “no unsolicited submissions accepted” policy of every half-viable gallery in our major art cities is indicative of the insiders’ game that is the contemporary art world. The logistical challenges posed by open submissions would be significant. There is no denying this fact. But the artistic and philosophical benefits far outweigh those concerns. If we’re involved in this enterprise in order to further Art, to carry on its cherished traditions, we need to be inclusive and genuinely open-minded. If that comes at a cost to our insider cool factor, if it detracts from the professional value of our air kisses and small talk, then so much the better.

4

In 1976, at age 55 and after a run of critical and commercial success, Agnes Martin left New York, eventually settling into a life of near-seclusion in New Mexico. She

began painting again in her new home and the work reestablished her in the field. She showed at Pace, one of the premiere art galleries in the world, until her passing in 2004. During that time she was the subject of a number of important museum exhibitions, and historicized as one of the great painters of her generation. Her works were celebrated as both expressionistic and minimal, bridging an art historical divide that typically reveals itself as a gaping and antagonistic chasm.

Martin also cancelled a very prestigious retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1980 because the Museum required that a catalogue be produced to accompany the exhibition. As a person who considered herself aligned with both Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Martin explicitly disavowed pride and ego, as well as intellection generally. "It is commonly thought that everything that is can be put into words," she dismissively wrote in her essay *Beauty Is The Mystery of Life*.

2e

I worry that our current art industry incentives us to abandon our inner lives in favor of busy social calendars. We've gone from "know thyself" to "brand thyself" as a philosophical edict. Not "no thyself," in the Buddhistic tradition, but no thyself as a marker of an insincere, inauthentic social class. Not a dissolution of ego but instead a calculated, chatty, implicit argument that ego is all there is.

4a

Silence is so accurate.

Mark Rothko

I paint with my back to the world.

Agnes Martin

Martin lived the final 28 years of her life primarily in silence, saying all that she needed to say in her art and allowing no visitors to her New Mexico home. She characterized this solitary existence as springing from the spiritual. Which makes it unsurprising that she speaks so highly of the Abstract Expressionists.

Rothko's painting is pure devotion to reality. That's what it is! ... Barney Newman's paintings are about the joy of recognition of reality. Pollock's are about complete freedom and acceptance. ... [T]he Abstract Expressionists ... did all that, but they did it in such varied ways. And still they manage to fight.⁵⁵

This is instructive. It reminds us of the radical political element that can live in abstraction, and in that particular moment in the history of the practice, while also reminding us that Martin – often defined by the odd formality of her work and the distance of her personal position – was very much aware of those politics.

Artwork is the only work in the world that is unmaterialistic The newest trend and the art scene are unnecessary distractions.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Gruen, John, "What We Make, Is What We Feel': Agnes Martin On Her Meditative Practice," *ARTnews*, 1976.

⁵⁶ Martin, Agnes, "Beauty Is The Mystery of Life," 1989

2f

With any sort of perspective on the issue, one recognizes that allowing networking to exercise a determinative professional influence is exactly the way to organize a system, or “world,” that favors insiders and elites without being explicit about this fact. The pre-existing favoritism is built into the system so seamlessly that it can be confused with the natural order of things. But we’re a few generations into such a system in the art world. We see the effects. The network is sometimes literally nepotistic. It always, no pun intended, has a relationship to nepotism.

It’s up to us to change that system, to champion genuine human goodness – kindness, open-heartedness, broad-mindedness – and truly meaningful art over the shallow and insider-favoring schmooziness we’ve inherited and, thus far, promulgated. What does it say about us if we don’t try?

1

As with most things, it's much easier to identify and analyze a problem than it is to solve it, either locally or globally. In the case of art world socializing I definitely have failed to achieve perfect solutions in my own life. It is transparently clear that a significant part of what is going on in those situations is professional networking, which we can gloss however we wish but at root involves a strategic manipulation of the human instinct towards companionship and community. For a long time I just couldn't reengage with that practice, and I still largely refrain. It is possible to stay in touch with people in less official art settings, to keep the interactions in a more human space.

But there is a part of me that wonders if I've overreacted, or overcompensated, or if I've just given into my lonely-boy-only-child-growing-up-detached-from-his-parents-on-a-sparsely-populated-mountainside upbringing, allowing it to return me to the psychological safety that a quiet, fairly non-social life offers. The truth is almost certainly that my

motivations are multiple and, to some extent, conflicting. Once one starts down the purist/idealist road the next steps logically follow. Additionally, I did grow up as that isolated child, and the only period in which I ever truly overcame it was the approximately six-year span in which I hustled my art in the accepted social fashion, usually making a point of attending events alone so that I would be forced to meet lots of new people, and finding that the strategy worked. I went to art functions at least four or five nights per week. My friendship group was quite large and my art was showing. Things were going as planned. But I knew all along I was faking things. That went from an understanding, in the early stage, that I was adapting to social conventions in the proper manner, to a gnawing and increasingly overwhelming feeling that not only was I putting on something of a social mask, I was also putting on a creative mask. I had become the artist I thought I should be. I had become the artist I thought the world wanted.

And maybe it did want that artist. There was certainly some evidence to suggest that this was true - shows, sales, press, etc - but it wasn't the artist I wanted, nor the one I felt the world needed. Which analysis then doubled back onto my social self, and that semi-charade, and the next thing I knew I

was shutting down my studio and moving across the country to live in the woods. I suppose I thought I'd find my real self if there were few other selves around to perform for or respond to.

In truth I still feel that way, years after my dropout. The standard contemporary view on the subject is that taking in a multiplicity of diverse perspectives helps to broaden us as art thinkers. My own sense is that this multiplicity notion does indeed have merit and does indeed broaden us exactly as advertised. However, for every, say, unit of gain we secure in this manner we lose about 1.5 units by becoming more and more homogenous. That "melting pot" of perspectives tends, indeed, to melt into a somewhat uniform whole. Sharp edges are made smooth due to social pressures, common ground is emphasized while genuine intellectual disagreements due to differences in background are downplayed. Any philosophical disparities or habits of unconventional thinking that may have survived entry into the contemporary art social world are erased, or significantly minimized, during this process. In the rare cases when this isn't achieved the party that cannot "fit in" is relegated to a space outside of "contemporary art." In the name of

expanding our perspectives we subtly destroy both our own uniqueness and that of others.

2

There are other factors too. I began writing this book in 2012, about four months prior to my son's birth. He's almost four now, and has a baby sister, who is just over one-years old. A family, a job, a book to write, art to make, two large dogs to walk - there are a lot of reasons for me to not go out that often. At the very least there are practical limitations in addition to the philosophical hesitations. But I don't pretend that I'm doing it right. In fact I know that I'm not. There are people I really care about who I don't see as often as I should.

3

Artists often find themselves most intensely in their work when they are most detached from the "real world." Hence the invention of the artist's studio, the artist's residency, the creative sabbatical, etc. On some level we

all recognize this as true, though the precepts that would seem to be necessary for such recognition are often called into question if they are isolated as standalone concepts. The benefits of solitude, of a temporary removal from the social, create discomfort if cast as a creative truth or even a creative "best practice." The social world is quite uncritically received as the entity within which artists must work, so as to serve the corresponding presumption that it is also the world their work is meant to impact. The fact that art made in solitude, even art made by quite solitary individuals, has a long track record of reaching and impacting the social world is rarely given much consideration. Instead the non-social artist is simply written off as old-fashioned, romantic, and so on, the familiar euphemisms, in lieu of giving actual thought to the topic.

"Be a light unto yourself; betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves."

-- Buddha Shakyamuni, from the Mahaparinibbana Sutta

This version of the sentiment, delivered by the dying Buddha, we are told, as his last words, seems exactly right to me as long as we read the mention of "Truth" as providing a context for the use of the word "refuge," marking it

as referring to an intellectual/philosophical refuge rather than a physical one. They also suggest an origin for my advocacy on behalf of the spiritual, as such an advocacy is always paired with a belief in the "Truth" that may be found within each of us.