

# Fair Comment

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**Reflections on criticality  
at Art Fairs**

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An art art art supplement  
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# Reflections on criticality at Art Fairs.

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We have decided to focus this supplement on the relationship that artists and not-for-profit artistic organisations currently have with art fairs. More likely to have critical or aesthetic, rather than profit-making agendas, how do artists negotiate the terrain of art fairs which are first and foremost about buying and selling art and the generation of income?

Probably the majority of artists working today are not completely anti-capitalist, but distaste for the market comes from a discomfort with financial speculation around art-objects – in line with a general view that art should be about an experience, about ideas, about changing perceptions, possibly changing the world. Not about buying something that you can hold onto for a bit and then sell for a profit (which usually has no direct effect upon the artist but rather oils the wheels of wealthy galleries and lines the pockets of successful dealers). Just how much profit from this multi-million pound industry actually filters through to the artists responsible for the products and ideas that enable the success of that industry? Alternately, could the artist and the art world really survive without the market that also exploits them?

We live in a commercial world and we can't deny art is part of the wider economy. The writers selected all acknowledge the necessity of a relationship between commercial and critical arenas for art – and the art fair's role in this relationship – but differ on what the boundaries and structure of this alliance could or should be.

**Gill Howard** reflects on her recent experience with photography commissioning agency Pavilion at Glasgow art fair. She suggests that the market is a key force in contemporary culture so artists and organisations must necessarily engage with it to challenge and provoke from within.

**Anne Field** profiles the Free Art Fair and asks whether it functions perversely to promote the commercial system or truly offers an alternative to the marketplace, in which artists can control distribution of their own work.

**Rory Macbeth** lays out some of his previous artistic projects, exploring the scope for non-commercial work to exist in a market-driven art world. He explains how a recent proposal, intended to harness the power of the market for individual artists, is perhaps his most critical response to that market so far.

**Andy Abbott** conversely has become disillusioned with the notion that mainstream events like art fairs can offer entry points for criticality and alternative culture.

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Edited by Amelia Crouch and Zoe Sawyer.

# “Good business is the best art.” Andy Warhol.

**Gill Howard**

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Artists engage with dominant systems in a variety of ways. Some avoid them, fearful of being corrupted and compromised by a world they don't believe in. Some make comment from afar or dip their toes in the water purely for survival and still others manipulate and seduce systems, for artistic or commercial ends.

For the contemporary artist perhaps the most dominant (and complex) of all systems is the art market. How does the artist negotiate a system that appears to privilege money over artistic integrity, encouraging celebrityisation of the art world and rivalling the critic as arbiter of value for a work? Art fairs are also tricky territories for arts organisations who seek to respond to the contemporary context (a key element of which is the market) whilst continuing to produce and exhibit critical, cutting edge and challenging work.

I work for Pavilion, a not-for-profit visual arts organisation that is attempting to find ways to engage with the often fickle context of the art market. In 2007 we rose to the challenge by launching a collection of Special Edition prints by a number of emerging artists who wanted to avoid the constraints of commercial representation. This year we took some of that work to Glasgow Art Fair, though we do not have, or seek, exclusive representation of any of these artists.

Art fairs cause consternation for artists, arts organisations and audiences alike. On the one hand



Far Left : And the Word Was God, (2008), Lydia Goldblatt, commissioned by Pavilion  
Left : Per Pulveram Ad Astra, (2007), Eva Stenram, commissioned by Pavillion

they are excellent ways to access new audiences, to generate project income, to create profile and – not least – to have impact. On the other hand they privilege commodification of art over criticality, notoriously attracting visitors with poor taste and far too much money!

That said the recent phenomenon of art fairs aiming to find ways to critically engage and educate the viewer cannot go unnoticed. Whilst at Glasgow Pavilion we were invited to contribute to a series of critical discussions around notions of collecting. At Frieze there has always been a non-commercial strand of commissions. London Art Fair has a project space and the Affordable and the Free Art Fairs all seek – in some way – to circumvent the ruthless commercialism associated with the fair.

Lisa Le Feuvre excitingly suggested in a recent edition of Art Monthly that art fairs are about producing and critically engaging with culture. But is this really possible? Do Frieze's commissions simply pay lip-service to critical art or do they have a real validity? Do people listen to talks or engage in critical discussion

whilst coming to find their own Damien or Tracy? At Glasgow our participation in 'Talking Art' didn't lead to a single sale. Even after our talks the art buyers still plumped for the uber-kitsch Pope on a Bicycle at the stand next to ours.

Yet, in spite of all the limitations, I still believe there is broader value in contributing a critical voice to the art fair. Art fairs are where the art world, the business world and popular culture interact and fuse. So, where better for artists and arts organisations to intervene, to critique, to probe and to question? If art aims to produce and respond to critical discussion about contemporary culture then the art fair – with its jarring of voices, its bad taste, its celebrity presence and its curious young artists – can only be fertile territory.

This autumn, the big show at Tate Modern is 'Pop Life: Art in a Material World' which explores the conflation of culture and commerce in response to Warhol's provocation. The show presents a picture of a generation that has harnessed and exploited the marketplace for its own ends and through it negotiated contemporary

culture on its own terms. The market is a key force in contemporary culture and for artists and organisations to have impact we must continue to find ways – however small or seemingly unsuccessful – to challenge, to provoke but also engage with the market. In part the inspiration to do this comes because of and not despite of the art fair's problematic context.

Gill Howard works as Audience Development Officer at Pavilion and is a freelance writer.

[www.pavilion.org.uk](http://www.pavilion.org.uk)

# The Free Art Fair: Anti Art Fair or Savvy Artist Marketing Tool?

**Anne Field**

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The art fair, a definitive merging of art and markets, represents the new wave of hotly contested consumerism in the art world. Art purists see the art fair as decadent and vulgar with unedited works and a confusing conglomeration of artists. Busy gallery owners and collectors view the fair as an ingenious solution to the inefficiency and opacity of the art world. In the midst of this animated discussion, emerged a curious beast – The Free Art Fair. In its third (and final) year, The Free Art Fair's rebellious nature lies in one simple and glaring difference from other arts fairs — all of the artwork is free.

During October in the midst of Frieze, contemporary artwork by a variety of artists, some supported by large galleries and museums, and some lesser-known practitioners, is given away on a first-come, first-served basis. In 2009 over 60 artists are involved in the Free Art Fair, at the Barbican, remarkably it's all achieved without exchanging money.

The Free Art Fair is simultaneously a product of, and a divergent response to, the commercialisation present in the art fair phenomenon. At heart, the Free Art Fair represents an appeal to the true value of art. "I felt depressed that the only way the media, and some people, including artists seemed to value art was by how much it cost or where it was shown" states the Fair's founder, Jasper Joffe. "Most artists are pretty poor...and I wanted to draw attention to the fact that most of us do it for the love of it, not the fame and money."

In a profession where so many are underpaid and their artwork undervalued, it may seem odd to give work away. However, the Free Art Fair's commercial implications should not be underestimated.

The Free Art Fair targets art lovers who may not have the means to purchase work at current market prices,



The queue, The Free Art Fair, 2008.



individuals with the mindset of passionate collectors. The fair's audience are dedicated enough to wait countless hours in a queue, sleeping on the streets, with no assurance that they will still find the work they want once inside. Joffe understands that "commercial galleries are a little piqued" by The Free Art Fair and its potential effect on sale prices for their artists work. However, the passion of the Fair's collectors suggests that the works are unlikely to be resold quickly at low prices (decreasing the value of the gallery's stock). What may be most worrisome to the galleries is the fact that Free Art Fair artists have essentially reclaimed control over their artworks' distribution.

In a largely unregulated art world, many artists rely on their gallery representation for distribution of their output. Their work, and the power of establishing price, lies in the hands of the dealers and the collectors to whom they sell. Thus for artists to take on the distribution of their own work (even one piece per year) at a fair and in such a public way, is extraordinary. What makes this event even more unusual is that these artists are producing unique pieces for the fair. Joffe encourages the artists to incorporate the idea of "free" into their work: "I am interested to see if the fair can free the artists as well as free their work."

The Free Art Fair, touted as a beacon for the internet inspired free culture movement, therefore offers unique works in finite supply. Though Joffe is not beyond considering a Free Art Fair in Miami or New York, this is the third and final year in London. Regardless of its philosophical impact, the ultimate financial test will come many years from now, with the fair's effect on the works' value at resale. Will 'Free Art Fair' in the provenance negatively affect the value of the artwork? Or will the Free Art Fair be remembered as an artistic movement, and ultimately reveal itself to be the savviest of artist-run marketing tools?

Anne Field is an Arts Professional currently receiving her MA in Art Business from Sotheby's Institute.

The Free Art Fair  
[www.freeartfair.com](http://www.freeartfair.com)

Left : Giveaway Stephen Farthing, The Free Art Fair, (2008)  
Middle : Free collector with Rose Gibbs, The Free Art Fair, (2008)  
Right : The first person to get free art, The Free Art Fair, (2008)

# Critical mess. Criticality and Art Fairs.

**Rory MacBeth**

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A lot of people (artists especially) are disappointed by art fairs. They seem to see them as some kind of sordid sell-out. But art fairs are for making money, that's what they do. The problem is that – aware of artists' unease with the market – fairs tend to mis-market themselves as primarily cultural events. It is just the nature of advertising and branding, but many people close to the industry seem to have blind-spot for this.

It is a situation begging for some kind of criticality, but from who? It can't really be delivered by those running the fairs because they have their own agenda – making money – and any criticality they allow in will be serving or subservient to this. So, for instance, any curatorial film or performance projects instigated by fairs are primarily to get the punters in. There is room for criticality and these projects can kick up more interesting artworks than you might find among the booths, but they tend to be at best an aside and at worst a smokescreen to the money-making agenda.

Art fairs often account for at least 50% of participating galleries' sales. Any gallery aggressively critical to the fair system would be biting the hand that feeds it. So

criticality instigated by a gallery is generally done as a kind of complicit set-piece with the understanding that money will flow in directly as a result of the publicity gained. For instance, consider the wide press coverage received by Rirkrit Tiravanija at Art Basel 2005 when the artist bricked up his dealers empty booth.

So, it looks like criticality may be left to people and organisations outside of, or with a degree of independence from the market. There are artists and organisations that have managed a genuine criticality in and around art fairs (Vaast Coulson springs to mind) but for simplicities sake I am going to discuss my own experiences and their variety of limited successes, which throw some light on the question of how and where criticality might exist in relation to art fairs.

I have made two site-specific artworks that aimed to be directly critical of their fair environment. One was a large thought-bubble that hung high above all the booths of Volta Art Fair in Basel in 2007 that said "...oh god...". It worked ok, but felt a little neutered by being requested by the fair as a centrepiece – like a bit of a knowing nod. In another project I was given a booth by the Arts

Council at an art fair in Manchester, which I then sublet via a local estate agent. Booths are expensive, but mine was 1p a day, on the condition that anyone else could sublet for the same fee. By the end of the fair the unit filled with a variety of people (artists, children, passers-by and other galleries) all using the space for whatever they wanted. This ensuing mayhem felt more successful than the thought-bubble, perhaps because it was done without the permission of the fair organisers (whom it upset) or the Arts Council. The thought-bubble was more successful in terms of the fair because it sold, which for me left its potential for criticality in an odd place.

While the above works were sited awkwardly within the art fair structure, in 2004 I instigated a project that attempted criticality from outside the fair. PILOT attempts to address the imbalance of representation encouraged by a market-based system. It provides a platform for artists who – for whatever reason – don't have commercial representation. For each edition one hundred prominent and emerging curators, critics, artists and collectors are asked to nominate one un-represented artist to take part. By being comparable in size to art fairs and running concurrently, but removing all commercial concerns (everything is free



Left : Rory Macbeth, Courtesy of the artist.

for everyone, no fees are taken, books are given away, free refreshments etc), PILOT set itself up as a critical opposite to art fairs which make money of all aspects (artists, galleries, visitors, catering, bars, talks). It opens up debate and celebrates variety of opinion – both from the weird diversity of artists thrown up by the nominating system and in accompanying publications. Like most idealistic projects it has many sustainability issues but it points out that only a tiny percentage of great artwork is represented in a market-based format and provides one model for how non-commercial work can have a comparable platform.

Lastly, I want to mention a fairly innocuous suggestion which has elicited some quite surprising reactions. Recently I have happened to find myself in Leeds, a city that doesn't need a commercial gallery in the traditional sense because there is no market here. But there are artists. So I suggested something which I think is bound to happen somewhere, sometime soon. I suggested that Leeds has a commercial gallery that only exists in art fairs. I approached a number of fairs including Zoo with this idea, thinking they would be excited to be the first to

pitch a new format of gallery that acknowledged the importance of fairs. I was surprised to be met with horror at the idea. From their reaction it seemed this was far more critical than any artistic intervention, or an outside agency like PILOT. I thought it was a pretty obvious and uncritical idea that makes sense of a changing market. There are already consortiums of small galleries combining to take on a single booth in a fair and a good number of galleries have downsized recently, some becoming little more than office spaces, while still doing fairs. Is this so different from my suggestion? Surely, not having an unnecessary shop-front is the next logical step, especially as it is driven by the desire to maximise profit - a market's guiding principle. While I can't be sure of the actual reasons that prompted the negative responses I received, I can't help wondering if this approach – laying bare the profit making agenda - is, by accident, the most critical of all.

Art fairs are in many ways the wrongest place for criticality but it is precisely because it is so wrong that it is exactly right. The more nerves touched the better, such moments of friction help to clarify where

boundaries lie and what the real agendas are. Art fairs are environments where certain bits of culture are given a financial value. Criticality does not fit into this system (it would if it could be bought or sold), however it has a useful and necessary role helping to define what a fair is, what art's relationship to the fair is and ultimately what art is.

Rory Macbeth is an artist and lecturer currently living and working in Leeds

<http://www.pilotlondon.org>

# All The Fun of the (Un)Fair.

**A brief reflection on the uneasy relation between market-led and critical art practice <sup>1</sup>**

**Andy Abbot**

When I was around fifteen years old I used to look forward to the fair coming to town. Not because I was excited about the rides but because it was a good opportunity to get involved in some subversive activity – drinking, smoking and mucking about. The fair drew a lot of other teenagers with a similar agenda, that being, to meet people and have a cover story for why they were covered in sick and smelled funny when they got home. The fair, then, whilst in itself boring, was a good excuse for some naughtiness.

This notion of a symbiotic relationship between the mainstream and the alternative, the centre and the fringe, the market and the radical, is the one to which we as 'critical artists' often subscribe. Even when our goal is to eventually supersede them, the mainstream and the institutional are seen as useful, necessary entrance points; encounters or events that may lead towards more subversive actions and thought.

Other perspectives, equally optimistic and pluralist, understand the market or the mainstream as machinery that can be hi-jacked and overridden from within. This might occur by occupying cracks and spaces within the institution that provide opportunity for reflective critique, or by way of 'a critique by overidentification', that is, through satirising its form; contributing to its self-destruction by overflowing the canal.

As I get older I become more cynical about the socially transformative potential of this parasite/host relationship between critical activity and the mainstream. Not least because of the practices it excuses, that range from ironic consumerism to the uncritical appropriation and

abuse of radical ideas and texts. Moreover, it assumes and sustains an unequal relation between mainstream and fringe, where radical or alternative activity accepts its submission or its minority in relation to the market, allowing the latter to dictate the spaces and language that critical art occupies and uses.

In this unequal relationship the market 'generously' provides opportunity for critique, safe in the knowledge that its own powerful and clear voice can drown out the quieter and less easily deciphered voice of dissent at any given moment. Regardless, those of us who invest our beliefs in the radical potential of art graciously accept these opportunities in some romantic belief that the underdog will come through in the end.

Seeing as the revolutionary moment, however, is nowhere to be seen on the horizon, perhaps the time has come to take additional measures, to redress the balance, to take over the fair, and occupy the ground on which it pitches? Critical art can begin by occupying the cracks and margins created by the mainstream, no doubt, but it has a responsibility to take root there, refuse to budge and cause a blockage.

Although my teenage self, over time, realised that we could have the fun of the fair without the fair as an excuse, it never really occurred to me that we could have taken the fair over completely. With a bit more talk, calling to one another from those dark corners we had occupied, and the audacity to stand our ground, perhaps we could have drowned out its noise and created a space for genuinely subversive activity, rather than just a bit of fleeting, sanctioned naughtiness?



Above : Michael Tokarz of the band We Be the Echo <http://webetheecho.com/>

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<sup>1</sup> By critical art practice I am here referring to those practices that have as their aim the transformation of the conditions under which they are produced rather than to act merely as a means to survive within those conditions: that is, 'activist', 'socially transformative', 'a-capitalist', 'counter-hegemonic' or 'counter-economic' practices to name but a few of the labels they have been given of late. These may or may not exclude market-led practices; those being, practices that are exchanged as commodities within the 'art world.'

# Joining Matt Roberts Arts

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Matt Roberts Arts is a voluntary organisation managed by emerging artists and curators with a desire to share knowledge about career and exhibition opportunities. Since 2006 we have exhibited 156 artists' work, and delivered education and professional development to over 200 people.

If you would like to benefit from all of our activities you may wish to become an associate member. Membership lasts for a calendar year, and would allow you to:

- Apply to the annual 'Salon' open submission prize exhibition and Video Salon prize
- Attend evening lectures on subjects including: How to apply to open submission opportunities, how to develop web presence and e-communications, how to improve your professional income.
- Sign up for weekly portfolio discussions with our curatorial team.
- Receive free tickets to members' benefits.

Membership is £8 for people based in the UK, and £10 for people based outside of the UK. If you would like to join you can pay via paypal by logging in and sending a payment to [info@mattroberts.org.uk](mailto:info@mattroberts.org.uk)

Alternatively you can post a cheque made out to Matt Roberts Arts to:  
Unit 1, 25 Vyner Street, London, E2 9DG

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