

The Myth of Meritocracy in Fine Arts

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The art world has a gentleman's agreement about preserving the façade of meritocracy. They feel that it is necessary to be respectable. It is understandable since they are often criticized for not being more meritocratic. The general public and many artists themselves see meritocracy as an ideal system of rewarding artists. I argue that meritocracy is impossible in fine arts, and there is no reason, therefore, to pretend to honor meritocracy. If the artist is famous, and if his artwork commands a hefty price, there is no reason to question him further; he is a good artist.

In a field like fine arts whose primary concern is subjectivity, what does meritocracy mean? Merriam-Webster defines it, "a system in which the talented are chosen and moved ahead on the basis of their achievement." That is, a meritocracy assumes that achievement and reward are two separate issues. In sports, science, and business, for instance, meritocracy is relatively easy to define: winning competitions, discoveries, inventions, profits, and so on. Meritocracy is a system of rewarding based on measurable merit. Unless the achievement is measurable to some degree, rewarding based on merit is impossible.

Andy Warhol once said that a measure of good art is its price. In response, some would argue that an artwork could have a high price tag but be devoid of any artistic merit. Such presumed discrepancies are what often bring up the question of meritocracy. That is, we assume that a price of an artwork should reflect its merit.

What Warhol means is that the price of an artwork is its merit, that is, the two are one and the same thing. What this essentially says is that it is not possible to have a meritocracy in fine arts, and that there are therefore no other ways to gauge a value of an artwork than its price.

We normally interpret such a view about fine arts as an expression of cynicism, but I argue that there is nothing cynical about this. To believe in meritocracy in fine arts would be to believe in the existence of a standard by which all art can be measured. Just as it is pointless to criticize people for their lack of meritocracy in choosing their lovers, merit has no place in fine arts. A price of an artwork does not point to anything but to itself.

This is not to say that an artwork could not have personal merit independent of price, but we need to remind ourselves that meritocracy is a social concept that comes into play only when two or more people are involved in determining value of something. Since the only thing about art we can agree on is the fact that we all disagree, we have no choice but to accept the impossibility of establishing a meritocracy, which leads us to a conclusion that, in fine arts, you do whatever it takes to raise the price of your artwork. Again, this sounds like a cynical statement, but it is not.

Here, a story Tim Rollins told us when I was in college comes to my mind. For one show, he and his team of kids made a series of small artworks which ended up selling like hotcakes. They were excited by this good news and decided to make a lot more of them. This time, only a few (or none at all) were sold. Rollins said his team had learned a valuable lesson: When you become too opportunistic, people can sense it.

Many good things in life have this quality. Spiritualists who seek enlightenment, at one point or another, face a maddening dilemma: The more you crave for enlightenment, the further away from it you get. Often the best way to achieve your goal is to keep it only in the back of your mind. I argue that the same applies to fine arts. Your goal as a fine artist is to achieve the highest price possible as Warhol suggested, but if you let this be your preoccupation, you get further away from it. A cynical attitude towards making money seldom pays off like you think it would.

Then what does it mean to be sincere? It is no accident that those who are successful in fine arts are often skillful salesmen. They seem to have an intuitive understanding of how to influence people and how to be recognized. This type of talent is often looked down on. Many would argue that salesmanship is independent of artistic talent, but I disagree. Great artists are often the keenest observers and interpreters of our society and culture. Their artworks fascinate us because they reflect their keen observations. If they possess a talent for observing and understanding aspects of our culture that most of us cannot see, it would only make sense that they would be good at influencing and getting recognized by that very culture. Their talent for salesmanship is not a separate talent from their

artistic talent. They are one and the same thing. They are as sincere and passionate about their salesmanship as they are about their art, and that is why they tend to succeed in influencing others.

Why does salesmanship get such a bad rap in the first place? We often hear comments like this: Artist X is successful not because he is a good artist, but because he is a good salesman. From the perspective of salesmanship being just another expression of artistic talent, such a statement is a contradiction. Since much of modern advertising is banal and vulgar, we tend to forget the significance of advertising and salesmanship. Our cultures evolve because we let others know who we are, what we do, how we feel, and how we think. At the level of individuals, advertising ourselves seems like a selfish act, but without our urge to be known, understood, and recognized, our culture would not evolve. Advertising is an integral part of being a productive member of a society.

If salesmanship is an expression of artistic talent, it would be interesting to analyze how some of the successful artists achieved their recognition. Below, I am going to give some case studies.

In “Time Out Guide to the Saatchi Gallery”, there are a few articles that describe how so-called “YBAs”, Young British Artists, lead by Damien Hirst, achieved their international fame. Their beginning is the most interesting part. Counter to the romantic and idealistic notion commonly held by young artists, Damien Hirst appears to have understood that success cannot be achieved alone or based solely on presumed artistic merits. He enlisted his friends from college, like Sarah Lucas and Gary Hume, to work as a team. He organized a group show called “Freeze” for which he sent taxis to fetch important figures of the British art world. Even his relationship with Saatchi is a collaboration.

I speculate that Saatchi, in order to establish himself as an influential figure in the art world, needed more than just money. Initially he collected New York artists like Donald Judd, Andy Warhol, and Brice Marden. In 1985 when he first opened his gallery, these names were already well-established. For him to earn respect as a collector, he needed to discover artists of his own. Saatchi, being an advertising guru with a deep pocket, found the perfect product in Hirst. Their partnership had all the signs of success. For those in the advertising business, Saatchi’s hit show, “Sensation”, felt oddly familiar and was easy to relate to. Their success reflects their uncanny understanding of how our culture works.

Working as a team to self-promote, like the way Hirst and his friends did, is a common pattern we find in the history of modern art. If you are not familiar with how self-promotion works in the art world, you might find it odd that many famous artists knew each other even before they were famous. If artists were to

be famous for presumed artistic merits alone, what are the chances that two genius artists happen to know each other years before they became famous? The reality is the other way around: They became famous because they worked together to be so.

When you read the collection of writings by the 60's conceptual artists in "Conceptual Art" published by Phaidon, you notice that many of them often wrote about each other before they were successful. This strategy must have worked quite well. If you write how great you are yourself, no one would listen to you. To get around this problem, you write about each other. For the same amount of effort, the latter is far more effective.

We can find many such groups who made self-promotion a team effort in the recent history of art. For instance, the Black Mountain school which included John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg. The New York school of Abstract Expressionists which included Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko.

The group strategy makes sense in many ways. You can tap into each other's resource (studio space, equipment, social connections, etc.). You can share skills and knowledge. Each person can specialize in certain aspects of promotion (writing, socializing, designing, getting publicity, etc.) What you say about each other would have more credibility to outsiders than if you had to talk about yourself. It is easier to organize an event or a show if it is done as a group. If one of them becomes successful, he could direct some of the attention to the rest of the team by frequently talking about them, by trying to introduce them to powerful people, by including them in a group show, and so on. If you work as a team, even if success is a matter of pure luck, the chance of one of the members becoming successful is much greater than you yourself becoming successful. By working as a team, the overall impact would be greater than the sum total of individual contributions, which is a phenomenon called synergy.

The concept of synergy is a common sense in the business world. The only reason why it is not in fine arts is because art is presumably about individual expression. It does not occur to many artists to work as a team, unless the point of it is an artistic collaboration. A nameless team can be formed only for the purpose of self-promotion. It is not such a foreign concept, if you think about the fact that, in conventional business, we form teams to make money, but each of us pursue different ideas of happiness in our private lives.

The fact that working as a team is more effective than working independently comes as no surprise. We could argue that human beings as well as most living creatures on earth are designed to work in teams. Teamwork is something fine

artists are not particularly known for because they tend to focus on the notion of individual. The ability to organize, lead, and work in a team is one of the most mysterious, profound, and creative aspects of human social life, yet many fine artists rarely experience being leaders or organizers of groups, and choose instead to work in solitude. It is somewhat ironic that artists who have little or no experience with organizing are often the most vocal critics of the major organizations of our society. This is all the more reason why artists like Damien Hirst who know how to work in teams deserve credit.

Some might feel that there is something almost underhanded about working in teams to self-promote, but the word “underhanded” would imply that there is a way to measure something to be fair and unfair in fine arts. Again, this argument implies a meritocracy as an ideal system. Fairness too comes into play only if something is measurable like in the Olympics. Furthermore, if you apply Game Theory to fine arts, it is possible that each artist’s selfish desire to become famous is what drives the art world to evolve. I would say, in fine arts, anything goes.

From this conclusion, I feel that it is time for us to go beyond the romantic notion of meritocracy, and sincerely recognize the significance of the salesmanship of artists. At least in Western art, talent for self-promotion is an inextricable part of what art is. Here are some ways in which sincere recognition of salesmanship can manifest in practice.

Galleries and museums put up façade of meritocracy, when what goes on behind the scenes has nothing to do with it. They are supposed to choose artists based on their artistic merit, not based on their friendship with famous artists, nor based on the power of their dealers. I feel that it would be healthier, if a museum exhibition, for instance, would be organized based on current market price, rather than pretending to know the merits of the artworks they present. In the end, they will achieve the same result, but the upfront premise would be more honest.

For galleries, it is rare that they would select their artists anonymously from a pile of slides based on presumed artistic merits. So, why not make the information public about the connections through which their artists came to be known to them? Perhaps even present a flow chart of connections.

Here is another justification for recognizing artist’s salesmanship. We tend to assume that an artist becomes famous because he was influential, but the opposite can also be true. Marcel Duchamp became an influential artist when he brought a urinal into a gallery, but at that point, he was already a successful artist. If he was only an unknown, struggling artist, the chances are the art world would have completely ignored his urinal. Or, it is possible that he would not

have had any gallery to take his urinal to. That is, he became influential because he was famous. Fame is not necessarily a reward for being influential. Often it is the other way around. Fame can be an artistic tool, just as money can be. In this sense, as an artist, there is a point in trying to be famous for the sake of being famous, so that you can use it artistically. This should not sound so unusual for those artists who have day jobs where their only aim is to make money, so that they can spend it on making their art. In other words, salesmanship is a craft like any other. Being able to effectively self-promote is no different from being able to paint well. It is a skill that can be used artistically, and is almost a necessity for an artist in today's world.

In "Illusions of Immortality", David Giles says, "[P. T.] Barnum's real 'show' was not the exhibition but the performance of the publicity." The same can be said of the modern fine artists; their real "art" is not the objects they make, but how they become famous.