

Babylon Now

BY JERRY SALTZ

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Originality is changing guises: Laura Owens's *Untitled* (detail, 2000).

Photo courtesy of Gavin Brown's Enterprise

"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." If turned around, Yeats's famous verse fits the contemporary art world: Things run together; the center only grows.

Not only is the art world bigger than it's ever been, its workings are better known. Efficiency has replaced disorder. Chaos is on the wane. The mood is self-congratulatory and the password is professionalism. As Barbara Kruger put it in a recent ad, "Another artist. Another exhibition. Another gallery. Another magazine. Another review. Another career. Another life." The avant-garde won and took no prisoners; there's no place left to trespass. Shock is a passé tactic, and "irony," as L.A. novelist Vanessa Place wrote, "is a dead man's game." The art world is like a conference call, a strip city run by a student government, an insider's game everyone is in on. The way some people talk about its humanitarianism you'd think it was a Sting song. We may not understand ourselves but we understand our system. And although this system undoubtedly affects the kinds of art that receive attention (making it harder for the smaller gesture, the slower take, or anyone over 35), the system runs, which is what people want it to do.

As mainstream culture usurps countercultures, and youth has its lifestyle sold back to it as catchphrases, subcultures merge with one another. Just as skateboarders in Moscow are aware of their counterparts in Los Angeles, artists in London and Tokyo have a good idea of what's going on in Berlin and Buenos Aires. This means hierarchies are breaking down, the situation is decentralizing, demographics are changing, and smaller nodes may soon supplant the center.

Nonetheless, pecking orders persist, an establishment mentality is the norm, alpha males and alpha females roam, and cliques are common. Perhaps the real model of the art world is still high school with money.

In any case, these are challenging times. The art world is among the most idealistic spheres around, but as its mechanisms accelerate to absurd rates and business permeates everything, finding a zone where things seem aesthetically—not commercially—driven, grows harder. A coterie of educated professionals, enterprising aficionados, and appreciative fans, all of whom think art is in the answering business, not the questioning one, seems determined to make art safe for everyone. I love museums and galleries but both have become more corporate. Museum directors function like CEOs; curators act like superstars; critics are perceived as (and often behave like) PR agents; auction houses ape museums; and museums exhibit fashion designers who make huge donations. There were never many rules in the art world, but even those rules have changed.

These changes have produced glitches—art-world equivalents to Bizarro World, that Superman realm where everything appears normal but is actually topsy-turvy. In this inverted domain, box office counts as criticality. Here a few young artists—who don't make waves but ride them—are having the ends of art careers without ever having had the beginnings. Instead of grass roots and up-and-coming energy, these artists are already surrounded by bold-faced names, socialites, and yes-people. Their openings look like those of aging art stars, and teem with Hollywood types, stylists, models, dotcommers, and publicists who shuttle cosmetically enhanced third-tier celebrities between interviewers and paparazzi.

Bizarro World also flourishes in the auction houses, which now tout their sales as the bona fide equivalents of museum exhibitions, instead of ways for people to make money. They produce lavish catalogs with essays by art critics, and dabble in the emerging artist market. Artists install their own work and participate in publicity. Borrowing a page from real estate firms who issue glitzy brochures on deluxe properties, Sotheby's published an entire volume promoting the May sale of Jeff Koons's sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (which eventually sold for \$5.6 million). Later that month, at an opening for Jorge Pardo's elegant hanging lamps in Sotheby's lobby, much of the crowd slipped into a glitch. While some attendees admired Pardo for intelligently toying with definitions of art and design, many blathered about how he had "infiltrated the seat of power." Few mentioned that maybe he was just decorating it.

As alienating as all this is, none of it is cause for alarm. If the Bizarro boats float, all who cruise on them will sail away happy. If the ships sink, everyone on board will go down with them. Either way, this party is probably already over anyway. Those who insist art is in trouble mistake this background noise of money and ambition for art. But art is resilient and crafty. It's been around for 25,000 years, and knows how to take care of itself. There *are* more bad shows than ever, but that's because there are more shows than ever. There are still good ones, even great ones

Naming names is tricky when the art world eats its young. Nevertheless, among a number of artists finding their way through the morass, Laura Owens, with her current exhibition at the Gardner Museum in Boston, shows how wily, insolent, and multivalent painting can be in the hands of someone who loves art but who chafes at seriousness and pretentiousness. There's something aggressive, knowingly amateurish, and discordant about her art. Although there is a lightness of being about it, she doesn't play for laughs or ironic effect. Like many artists these days, Owens knows that all art is contemporary art. She's not simply sleeping with dead styles and producing stillborn paintings (as artists did in the recent past). Neither is she merely mining art history. Instead, she elbows her way through all this. Francis Picabia said, "If you want to have fresh ideas, change them as often as you change your shirts." Owens says she tries to "start over every time." Indeed, there is a dizzy, unmoored freedom to her work, something easy, authentic, and dashing that never makes you feel stupid but always on guard. Owens dares you to do anything you want with her paintings *except* understand them.

Whether her art is "great" is irrelevant. It confirms that originality—which is still at the core of all great art—is simply changing guises. It's impossible to say what forms these guises will take. But as categories blend and definitions blur, as art absorbs aspects of visual culture and new technologies (and aspects of visual culture and new technologies absorb art in turn), art and our ideas about it will change. For now, the weirdness in the system means we have to be that much more conscious of the system. We have to try not to resolve ambiguities, know that for many the art experience has become a series of lowercase, low-definition encounters, and remember that the system, as Shaw said of fashion, is essentially an "induced epidemic." Like the Internet, as the art world becomes more known, those without preconceptions about its uses will use it in new ways.

In the meantime, we don't have to act ambitious because we *are* ambitious. Maybe if art were more like getting dressed—something we do almost unconsciously, yet with passionate attention to what makes us feel or look good—then it would be a place where the weather suits our clothes, not a place where uniforms are worn. With so many people stuck on autopilot, behaving like establishmentarians, pursuing the named instead of the nameless, and acting as if they know how to do everything, now is a perfect time for each of us to do things our own way. Sooner or later, the system will splinter into many systems. In the future everyone will be famous to 15 people.

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