

The Comprehensive Work of Documentation and Education of Julian Stallabrass

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ABSTRACT

The work of Prof. Julian Stallabrass is an example of intellectual consecrated to transfer civilizing messages on the contemporary art to the wider audience in a comprehensive style. The author explores major arguments presented by Stallabrass in two 14 minutes films directed by Jenny Morgan and produced by Sandra Leeming, which analyze issues with implications for future generations of artists, writers, and people visiting art centers, and identify potential risks for art documentation. The author concludes that Stallabrass' films dealing with art as a commodity and celebrity artist-brand are valuable works of art documentation coherently link to his efforts to educate masses on art. The author also suggests a research direction on the potential connection between warnings made by Prof. Stallabrass and traditional mechanisms of the art market.

INTRODUCTION

The art critic, photographer, and curator Julian Stallabrass (b. 1960) is best-known as an intellectual who has developed extensive and deep studies on the contemporary art.[1] By 1982, Stallabrass graduated as Bachelor in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Leighton Park School and New College in Oxford, and holds a PhD in 1992 at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, where he is professor of Art History. His books are remarkable contributions to the multidimensional context of the interaction between art and market.[2,3,4,5] He is editorial board member of the publications *Art History*, *New Left Review*, and *Third Text*, and member of the International Association of Art Critics. Stallabrass has written for *Art History*, *Burlington Magazine*, *British Journal of Photography*, *Contemporary Art Journal*, *Aperture*, *Modern Art*, *Prospect*, *Metronome*, *Art and Design*, *Art Monthly*, *Art Newspaper*, *Spanner*, *Artforum*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *Bazaar Art*, and *London Review of Books*.

The work of Stallabrass on art documentation started in 1990 at the Henry Moore Foundation with Moore's early sculpture, much of which was poorly documented. Stallabrass was involved in sorting and dating of bibliographical and installation photographs, preparation of

catalogue material, design of database for curatorial and cataloguing purposes, and managing the drawing archive for a new catalogue raisonné.[6] Later efforts of art documentation can be found in the series "Documents of Contemporary Art",[7] and his recent works in the media dealing with Avant Garde, Manet, Soviet photography, Moore, Steyerl, surrealism, Miró, and Dalí.[8,9] The curatorial work of Stallabrass started in 2001 at Tate Britain,[10] followed by his work at the Brighton Photo Biennial in 2008,[11] and a recent exhibition at the National Civil War Center in 2015.[12]

A wide diversity of critical issues of the art world are carefully treated by Stallabrass with distinctive transparency in the section "Rear Window" of the TV program "The World Today"[13] as an advanced and unusual form of art documentation and education of masses within specific contexts. This insipient and limited effort could deserve closer attention by academicians in the context of art documentation, education, and communication, because it points to potential risks. This article discusses on the arguments presented in two of the Stallabrass' films entitled "Art for everyone? Elite art in an age of populism", and analyses little noted issues of commercial practices that may affect art documentation.

THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF VISUAL ARTS

Fundamental concepts should be clarified before introducing subjects studied by Prof. Stallabrass, because art as a commodity and celebrity artist-brand could be understood as unrelated phenomena without objective relationship with the evolution of the contemporary art, art documentation, and the art market. A comparison between lessons learned from great thinkers that developed a coherent aesthetic vision before the 20th century,[14] and images of the most important artworks of the last 100 years[15,16] suggests the need for new points of view to make more rational proposals to humankind. Cultural legacy and knowledge have been abandoned for imposing anti-aesthetics,[17] forgetting that: “nothing was ever born from nothing”.[18] If, on the contrary, innovative cultural messages were represented by taking advantage of the mastery accumulated for centuries, mass culture would receive a significant benefit from visual artists. However, unfortunately, contemporary artists are constantly avoiding confrontations with rational, intuitive, and harmonic scales of aesthetic assessment.

Fundamental concepts of artistic representation[19,20,21,22,23,24] have been excluded from contemporary art without adding innovative aesthetic principles,[25] and theoretical developments that reject what humans are able to recognize as good taste[26] have been imposed. The result has been coexistence of apparently empty artworks [27,28,29] and classic genres, at similar levels of social recognition. Strength of messages of the contemporary art could be improved by a plurality of art representation that would set conditions to review the old canon. Probably, aesthetic proposals of a broader interest would generate a favorable influence on future changes in the contemporary art.

In addition, drastic economic and political changes in societies hosting major art circuits have given rise to dramatic modifications in the way art is presented to millions of people. This reality seems to be the driving force to present art as a commodity, and a major motivation for some artists to become themselves into celebrity artist-brand. The first phenomenon is the disturbing shift from advertising to branding of artworks that not only is focused to potential clients but also to artists, curators, journalists, critics, galleries, and museums. The second one is celebrity artist-brand which presents artists as

trademarks. Both phenomena not only affect the way people think on individual artworks, but also could be introducing serious distortion on art documentation. Branding, as a commercial method, more sophisticated than advertising, introduces the risk of documenting corporative activities while documenting art.

ART FOR EVERYONE

Films presented by Prof. Julian Stallabrass, directed by Jenny Morgan, and produced by Sandra Leeming are not only evidence of abundant expertise on art documentation and curatorship, but also suggest an interesting alternative to global media for building a forum to educate people on appraisal and current trends of the contemporary art. It is at first with surprise that the author found highly qualified professionals of refined feeling and deep thoughtfulness dedicating effort, resources, and time to art education through a TV program. Without excluding protagonists of the art market, Stallabrass smartly introduces major driving forces of the art world to the audience, and leaves many topics open for further discussion between artists, art lovers, collectors, writers, journalists, academicians, and investors. A total of four films have been presented by Stallabrass in the program “The World Today” in 2017. Subjects of the films S3E21 to S3E24 are: art as a commodity, celebrity artist-brand, Saatchi Gallery, and Wifredo Lam (1902-1982). Subjects of the first two films (S3E21 and S3E22) started to the author, because their direct impact on education of people visiting art fairs, galleries, and museums, although the remaining are eloquent pieces of art documentation through the media.

In the film S3E21, Stallabrass investigates how contemporary art is circulating as a commodity. He starts the film by showing the London Art Fair 2016, at the Business Design Center, and asking: “why people flow to art fairs; those shopping centers of high culture?” A set of interesting interviews actually clarify this subject during the 14 minutes film, suggesting further debates on the diversity of motivations to buy contemporary art. The first opinion is granted by Sarah Monk, Director of the London Art Fair: “Contemporary art is increasingly becoming something that masses are attracted to...”, but Stallabrass immediately finds a problem at this point. He argues that people visit art fairs as they go to major exhibitions, but these are not, and art is sold at fairs as a commodity, just like any other thing, which

people could do at any other shopping center. This observation is his first warning on the potential confusions introduced by the most traditional commercial practice in the art world: art fairs are understood by many as relevant artistic events, but they are not. As a consequence, these commercial activities are documented at least by the media at the same level of group exhibitions.

The second interview shows another issue of the problem. Peter Osborne, Director of the Osborne Samuel Gallery, explains the well-known business of art galleries in London, and why collectors prefer them to buy art. From this point, Stallabrass explains the transformation of galleries into more influential entities, which are able to buy contemporary art on a regular basis. Dario Illari, Director of Jealous Gallery, preferred to answer focusing on reasons of people for building collections. Finally, Stallabrass explains consequences of the current business model of art galleries on creation processes subordinated to a growing demand for contemporary art, which speed up the work of artists, damaging their capacity to express and transfers feeling to people buying art.

In the S3E22 film of the series, Stallabrass explores the phenomenon of celebrity artist-brand by asking a fundamental question: "Why a part of the artists are transforming themselves into brands?" He starts showing an iconic piece [30] for motivating to think on the transcendence of the subject. Here, Stallabrass masterly explains a true that is difficult to understand for most persons visiting an exhibition of contemporary art: "the content doesn't matter". He uses other piece made by Sarah Lucas, [31] three decades later, to show how a celebrity artist-brand "becomes into an exceptional individual". In these particular cases, Stallabrass highlights that there is not an actual message in these artworks, but an interest on reaching the widest audience as major priority. After showing other examples of celebrity artist-brand, Stallabrass invites to think in other hugely famous and successful artist who never was a celebrity artist-brand (Pablo Picasso 1881 - 1973), and suggests a comparison between his art and the work of celebrity artist-brand. He argues that: "once this stuff get true on into, elite culture took it into major collections. That's another effects of what happens. Richer collectors are no longer seeking to distinguish themselves by collecting things which other people don't understand." These films do much to secure Stallabrass' reputation

as a great master of the contemporary photography. Stallabrass utilizes natural and artificial light, and music to transfer curiosity to spectators by modulating intensity to reinforce communication with a mood of serenity and contemplation. His use of artistic resources seems to be a mean of showing other people how much he love art, and how he wants them to love it also. His choice of filming sites seems to be motivated by wishing to induce trust and safety among spectators, implying light, music, and silence to provoke a response of complicity and engagement. Stallabrass' interest is probably to translate his perceptual experience into his films, avoiding abstractions and symbols to educate. The significance of being in, paying attention to, and relating to filming sites is satisfactorily communicated to the audience.

The result of both films is, to the general spectator, a dynamic plenty of plausible artistic value, and intellectual neatness. Collaborations received from prestigious art institutions, during production process of the films, is relevant insight into how Prof. Stallabrass artistic and intellectual practice continues to resonate. His contribution to visual documentation of art has been to invest it with significant narrative on the evolution and trends of the contemporary art. These two films encourage audience to read and debate on the high relevance of mass culture. Most details of the films win, retain, and reward the attention with a continually increasing sense of pleasant learning. It is not difficult to give the reader who is unacquainted with the work of Stallabrass, an idea either of his message, on the one hand, or of the kind of prevalent feeling, on the other. Although the subject of these films is one in itself very interesting, Stallabrass keeps sincerity, authenticity, and avoid exaggerations even when more expressive resources could easily have been introduced to reinforce his statements.

The article published by Stallabrass in *Art History* in 2014 dealing with branding of museums should not be ignored to understand the actual dimensions of the problem treated in these films. [32] This eloquent set of 21 photos shows the impact of branding on visitors of museums, and suggests a radical change in their reputation as guardians and champions of the collective memory. Although serious approach to branding of museums may be found in the literature, [33,34,35] every photo included in the Stallabrass' article express enough as to be inspiration for making a silent film. Images do

not suggest a “temporary difficulty”, [36] but something penetrating museums to stay forever, asking for “loyalty”. [37] From photo 16 to 21, the impossibility of a rational outcome from this commercial practice becomes evident once a museum is “forced into the arms of private partners”.¹⁶ Here is another valuable example of the work developed by Stallabrass documenting a problem of the broadest interest for most artists, and people who acknowledge and deserve finding good art in galleries and museums. The author considers that traditional public and private interactions between art and commercial circuits should be added to the complex problem of a growing interference between artists and visitors of museums and exhibitions. The relationship between the problem analyzed by Stallabrass and commercial mechanisms of the art market seems to be an interesting research direction.

DEEPER INTO ART BRANDING

Complex, irregular, heterogeneous, and unpredictable barriers between artists and people who actually acknowledge visual art also affect art documentation and mass culture. The work of many artists has remained circulating as commodities for decades, subordinating talent mostly to clients’ whims. [38] Artworks created for satisfaction of individual tastes of collectors and dealers require huge investments in exhibitions and advertisements to develop an artificial market that is not based on the relevance of the artist’s career. At this point, however, commodities and art markets start to be different. Commercialization of commodities depends on global dynamics of the Stock Market Exchange, and each artwork circulates in the market as an individual financial asset with a specific price trend, usually defined at auction sale. Differences between both markets become even deeper when major driving force is taken into account: information asymmetry in the art market.

Commodities are not exclusive, but, on the contrary, originality of each artwork places artists at the core of a commercial mechanism governed by more complex mathematical principia. [39,40] Artists become monopolists of a financial asset after finishing every artwork, as owners of a unique object that generate competition among an undetermined number of persons who want to own it. This set of potential owners is the first source of information asymmetry that not only affects decision making processes in the market, but

also affects artists’ social recognition, visibility, and income. Information asymmetry is not only generated between artists and protagonists of the art market, but also among collectors, dealers, galleries, and auction houses.

This complex commercial mechanism sets the public value of artworks for next transactions. Future appraisals of artworks sold at public auctions will be based on previous records of realized price, which increases if social recognition of the artist grows. Therefore, celebrity artist-brand, branding of museums and galleries, social recognition of artists, and appraisal of artworks are directly associated to the interest of investors to obtain the highest possible rate of return from every piece, which is not sufficiently insured by traditional exhibition, advertising, and spontaneous interest of the media. Prominent examples were cited by Prof. Stallabrass: “Despite its popularity, the loyalty of even middle-class audiences for contemporary art is not guaranteed. The widespread media mockery over Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* display at the Turner Prize in 1999 was one indication of the fragility of the attachment. Furthermore, when a large number of works by young British artists were destroyed in a warehouse fire, the press and public response was mostly one of glee.”²⁷ [40] The author’s arguments are suggestive rather than decisive, trying to open a discussion on how to understand interactions between commercial practices at major art institutions and dynamics of the art market. Although other authors have made prescriptive claims on interactions between art and market, the author is not interested in judging commercial solutions found by private and state galleries and museums to face economic limitations, but on the risk of affecting art documentation and mass culture when commercial interest is the first priority of art institutions. Instead, the focus is on the visual work developed by Prof. Stallabrass to make warnings on the risks that introduces commercial practices in art documentation, education, and communication.

CONCLUSIONS

The extensive visual work and art documentation of Prof. Julian Stallabrass is a comprehensive and provocative invitation to read, investigate, and discuss on the contemporary art. Films described in this work may be considered as valuable documents on art that suggest an urgent need for alternative forums to educate masses, not only on appraisal,

but also on current trends of the contemporary art. Stallabrass has been able to capture and document a wide diversity of points of view on critical issues of the contemporary art in few minutes' films, where motivation to visit art center and collecting art are clearly explained. A direct link between the films described in this work may be established from the permanent coherence of the intellectual work and visual art developed by Stallabrass. As a whole, his work demonstrates the presence of a strong commercial interference in the contemporary art that put at risk authenticity of the intellectual work on art. The author suggests a connection between art branding and complex commercial mechanisms of the art market that remain to be investigated in depth.

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