Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Money and Power Corrupted the Essence of Art (Or Not?)

Throughout history, art has been a symbol of freedom and democracy, regarded as a fundamental pillar of individual will and freedom of expression.

However, today, these ideals have eroded under the dominance of economic interests and large capital.

Art is no longer a tool serving freedom and democracy; it has transformed into an industry shaped by financial gains and power relations. This transformation weakens the soul of art and clouds its original purpose.

Art as an economic commodity

In developed countries, the art sector is supported by collectors, investors, corporate sponsors, and art institutions. For example, global auction giants like Christie's and Sotheby's facilitated the sale of artworks for high prices, recording $7.1 billion and $6.5 billion in sales respectively in 2021.

These auctions have become the largest markets for buying and selling artworks and are the drivers of the global art market. At the same time, high-end gallery chains such as Gagosian Gallery conduct hundreds of millions of dollars in sales annually, turning art into an economic commodity.

These entities shape artists through high prices and market dominance, focusing on financial gain. Corporate sponsors often provide financial support for art events within the scope of social responsibility projects, strengthening their brand reputation. Major multinational companies enhance their visibility and consolidate their positions in the market via art exhibitions and events.

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In developing countries, the development of art is attempted to be supported by governments, local authorities, and civil society organisations. For example, in Turkey, my home country, Cultural Foundations finance significant events, while universities continue to train artists.

Events like the Istanbul Biennial and Contemporary Istanbul, as well as organisations in cities like Ankara and İzmir, are growing thanks to international support and sponsors, but they are mostly driven by market and financial powers.

Earning income from art is vital to the sector. However, galleries and auctions take high commissions from sales, often ranging between 20% and 30% of the sale price in global markets.

Artists, especially in emerging markets, are forced to sell their works at low prices, limiting their earnings. This demonstrates that in the process of shaping art, money and market rules have become decisive.

Turkey’s art sector

In Turkey, although the art sector is not yet fully mature, it is on a rising trend. Events like the Istanbul Biennial and Contemporary Istanbul, along with various local art fairs, have significant economic and cultural impacts, both nationally and internationally.

Nonetheless, these activities still largely depend on large budgets and sponsorship incomes. For instance, the annual budget of the Istanbul Biennial is estimated to be around 5 to 10 million euros, mostly covered by sponsorships and donations.

Behind these organisations are some of the richest figures globally. This indicates that in developing countries, art is used as a means of social mobility within the global jet set, and some even find it burdensome to spend money for it.

Shaped by economic interests and market forces

The fundamental problem of the art sector in the 21st century is that it has been shaped by economic interests and market forces. Art is no longer merely a domain of elites or market actors; it should be accessible to all segments of society and freely internalised.

Yet, in practice, high prices, speculative investments, and market manipulations have become systematic rather than accidental. Damien Hirst's statement, "Art today is nothing but an economic movement," best summarises this situation.

Many argue that artists now prioritise wealth and social mobility over originality and freedom. For example, what does Dave Hickey say? "Look, today's artists mostly focus on building their careers and increasing their wealth. Few venture to create art with free thought; most want to be popular and make money."

> Many critics and art figures believe that today, artists pursue material wealth and success rather than free thought and social sensitivity

Terry Smith mentions that much of the art world pursues the capitalist system, with big galleries and markets. "Most artists, aiming to be slightly richer and socially upward, move away from originality and genuine criticism. Therefore, what is produced is increasingly driven by large funding and success," he explained.

Boris Groys critiques art more critically: "Modern art was once free and critical, but now it has become a sector shaped by wealth and prestige, driven by market and financial success." He supports the idea that art has become intertwined with materialism.

Hal Foster adds, "In the art world, free thought and critical perspectives have diminished; instead, artists pursuing money and popularity are coming to the fore." It is said that many artists nowadays work more for material gain and career benefits, and those offering genuine social critique are few.

Jens Hoffmann shares similar views: "In today's art scene, most artists seem to have put aside their personal or social critique. The main focus has shifted to money and popularity. This has somewhat lost the true spirit of art."

As a result, many critics and art figures believe that today, artists pursue material wealth and success rather than free thought and social sensitivity, sometimes even ignoring certain values because of that.

Art as a propaganda tool

Of course, art also falls into the hands of political agendas. The relationship between art, power, and economy has historically been complex and multi-layered.

Since antiquity, patrons and rulers have shaped art to reflect their ideologies and interests. During the Renaissance, powerful financiers like the Medici family supported artists to serve their political and economic goals, directing artistic production accordingly. These works were often targeted at elites and used as ideological tools, rather than meant for the general public.

In the 20th century, totalitarian regimes and large states used art to reflect and control their ideologies. The anti-modern stance of Nazi Germany or the official art policies of the Soviet Union resulted in art becoming a propaganda tool for the authorities.

> States and large corporations increasingly influence art, formalising certain themes and artists to align with their interests

Countries like China, under the Chinese Communist Party, severely restricted artists'

creativity through strict state control, turning art into an instrument that serves government policies.

I vividly remember during Enver Hoxha's era in Albania, artists were often forced to include the leader's name in their works. Visiting such exhibitions, I recall feeling both amused and disturbed — titles like "Children eagerly awaiting Enver Hoxha" or "Happy peasant thinking of the leader" reflected how art was manipulated for political ends.

Today, under capitalist economies, states and large corporations increasingly influence art, formalising certain themes and artists to align with their interests.

For example, in China, the government tightly controls artists' exhibitions and works, limiting freedom of expression and political content. Such conditions threaten the autonomous, free existence of art and curb creative freedom.

Restoring the transformative power of art

In these circumstances, art has been subordinate to the most powerful political and economic interests, with values of freedom and democracy pushed to the background. It has become a sector primarily driven by profit and market fluctuations.

For the democratic development and liberation of societies, art must be free, accessible, and independent - Emre Alkin

This transformation erodes the collective memory and cultural identity of societies, replacing authentic and free expression with a speculative, profit-oriented market. Seen from this perspective, the real mission and core values of art are gradually dying under the shadow of economic and political pursuits.

However, resistance and alternative movements still exist. Worldwide, especially among independent artists, critics, and libertarian thought groups, there are efforts to restore the transformative power of art—its ability to foster free and democratic change.

In Turkey, independent studios, alternative galleries, and community groups are actively opposing this degeneration, striving to turn art into a collective voice of the public and society.

In conclusion, art should no longer merely serve income and market needs. For the democratic development and liberation of societies, art must be free, accessible, and independent.

Strengthening its core values and resisting the impositions of political and economic powers are crucial steps—reflecting the collective consciousness and struggle for freedom. Art should be a truly free and democratic space. Achieving this goal depends on social awareness and collective resistance.