

The Map and the Territory: Four Art Worlds

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Why did I call this text "The Map and the Territory"? The map here is the contemporary art that receives the most visibility. For many people it encompasses all the contemporary art worth paying attention to. But as I will discuss below, this map only covers two parts of a much bigger territory, leaving most of it invisible.



Introduction: there is no such thing as "contemporary art"

There is no single contemporary art. Perhaps you like going to museums, or you follow art on social media, or you are studying to be an artist — but what each of us sees is only a small part of a large universe. In this text I will describe four main worlds of contemporary art, and there are others. These worlds barely intersect: each has its own money, its own institutions, and its own criteria of success.

In the first part I explain briefly how all four worlds work — the market, social media, institutions, and the local art world. The second and third parts analyze the institutional art world (which includes contemporary art museums, biennials, grants, and residencies).

Part 1. The Rules of the Game

1. The Market World

The first world is the art of the art market. Its most visible part consists of the major art fairs (Frieze, Art Basel), the top international galleries (with spaces in several cities), and the main auction houses (Sotheby's and Christie's). But the market art world also includes thousands of smaller galleries and many other fairs and auction houses. They all operate by the same logic, simply at different levels: the gallery represents the artist, brings them to fairs, and builds prices and a biography with international visibility in view. (Local artists who sell outside this system belong to the fourth world, discussed below.)

This art continues both the traditions of the nineteenth century and those of the twentieth: it shows a person, a landscape, an event, it creates an imaginary world — or it works with abstraction, color, and form. Abstract works take up no less space than figurative ones, and sometimes more.

And many of them are neither painting nor sculpture: they are works on the wall that are not flat — reliefs, textiles, ceramics, layers of material, texture.

The wager is on visual pleasure, aesthetics, and tactility — and the work can be understood without reading an explanatory text. (In institutional art, by contrast, the text explaining the work is often necessary in order to understand it.)

2. The World of Social Media

The second world is the art of social media and online platforms: Instagram, ArtStation, DeviantArt, Behance, and others.

What counts here is skill, a recognizable style, and genre — illustration, concept art, 3D, digital painting. Success is measured by audience and commissions, not by exhibitions. Institutions barely notice this art, although in the number of artists and viewers it is far larger than the other worlds.

Sometimes an artist who has become popular here also gains opportunities in the market — if their style and recognizability can be turned into an object that can be sold.

3. The World of Institutions

The third world is institutional art: the art shown at biennials and in museums (Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, Stedelijk), often supported by public money and dominant in residencies, grants, and other art institutions.

This part of the system depends on the state, on foundations, and on curators — hence the difference in language, audience, and expectations. The market needs an object that can be sold and hung; the institution needs a project that can be explained, justified, and defended in a grant application.

4. The Local Art World

There is a fourth world, the largest of the four by number of participants and almost invisible to the international art scene. It is rarely written about in global art publications, but it has publications of its own: regional art magazines, exhibition catalogues, the local cultural press, and today local blogs and the social media accounts of the galleries, societies, and artists themselves — though here, as we will see, the audience online is a shop window rather than the source of standing. Such a world exists in nearly every country.

These are artists with professional training who work mostly in painting and drawing, exhibit regularly, teach in art schools, and sell to private buyers. Their exhibitions take place in municipal galleries, regional museums, art centers, and small commercial galleries. The infrastructure has different names in different places. In Britain it is the regional academies and societies — the Royal West of England Academy in Bristol, the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists — each maintaining its own gallery, alongside the annual open exhibitions of the Federation of British Artists societies at the Mall Galleries. In the United States it is art leagues, watercolor and pastel societies, plein-air associations, community art centers, and municipal galleries, running annual juried shows; the largest plein-air competitions draw applicants from across the country for a few dozen juried places. In post-Soviet countries it is the artists' unions, the houses of the artist, and the regional museums. The names differ; the structure does not.

An artist here may be known in their own city, and occasionally in several countries, if works have travelled into private collections. A career can last forty years and be entirely successful. This is not a failed version of the first three worlds, and not their antechamber: it has its own infrastructure of recognition and its own criteria.

The romantic conception of art remains dominant in this world: the artist as a person of a particular cast, the work as an expression of an inner world and a personal vision, talent as an

innate gift, inspiration as the source of the work. These ideas were formed in the nineteenth century and have been transmitted ever since by academic art training, which in most countries still teaches drawing from the model, composition, and mastery of the medium. They are shared not only by the artists but by their viewers and their buyers.

Who judges here. Fellow members of the society, local gallerists, museum staff, regular buyers, the municipal cultural administration — not international curators and not platform algorithms.

What counts. Skill and a sure hand. A recognizable individual manner. Beauty, mood, atmosphere. Legibility of the image. Continuity of work: a long exhibition list is itself an argument.

What language is spoken. The visual languages that art developed between 1870 and 1915, from Impressionism to abstraction.

But each of those languages was once a position in an argument. The Impressionists rejected the academic picture and the Salon jury; abstraction abandoned the depiction of the visible world altogether, and this was not a choice of manner but a statement about what art should be. Behind each language stood a manifesto, an opponent, and a risk.

Here none of that remains. These languages are now simply available as ready-made visual styles. An artist chooses among them the way one chooses an instrument, not the way one chooses a side.

Modernism has turned from a project into a repertoire.

How it differs from the other three. The difference from the institutional world is that there a work is expected to make a statement — about history, politics, technology, art itself — while here it is expected to deliver quality and impression. The difference from the market world is not that one sells and the other does not: everyone sells. The difference is scale, and what success converts into — a work sold to a collector in one's own city does not open a door to Art Basel. And the difference from the platforms world is that the internet here is a shop window rather than a habitat: standing is confirmed by an exhibition and a buyer, not by a follower count.

For most readers this is the most familiar of the four worlds. It is what one sees in a municipal gallery, and it is where most art education leads. It is worth understanding that this is not "art in general" but one of four worlds, with rules that do not apply outside it.

Part 2. Art as Investigation

A substantial share of institutional art works as visual journalism: the artist gathers facts and evidence, documents events, looks for connections and causes.

This "social art" is not homogeneous — there are different traditions and different terms (social

practice, socially engaged art, research-based art). But they share one feature: unlike journalism, it does not aim to be objective. On the contrary, it speaks from a definite position — and it may be criticism, activism, or propaganda.

In the institutions' own words

Here is how the art biennials themselves formulate it.

Venice, 2024. The 60th International Art Exhibition, *Foreigners Everywhere*, was devoted to artists who are themselves immigrants, exiles, and refugees. Its curator Adriano Pedrosa wrote that the exhibition would be “a celebration of the foreign, the distant, the outsider, the queer, as well as the indigenous.”

Sydney, 2026. The 25th Biennale of Sydney, *Rememory*, takes its title from Toni Morrison and describes its task as “revisiting, reconstructing, and reclaiming histories that have been erased or repressed.”

Gwangju, 2023. The 14th Gwangju Biennale, *soft and weak like water*, proposed to imagine our shared planet as “a site of resistance, coexistence, solidarity and care.” In Taiki Sakpisi's *The Spirit Level*, for example, the life, dreams, and memory of communities along the Mekong are documented: how farmers and fishermen cope with crisis through practices of animism and shamanism.

Example works: courts and investigations

Taryn Simon, *The Innocents* — portraits of people wrongly convicted of serious crimes and later exonerated.

Forensic Architecture, *The Murder of Halit Yozgat* — video, plans, and testimony reconstruct a killing and test the account given by the German security service.

Example works: climate, borders, networks

John Akomfrah, *Purple* — a video installation on climate change and deindustrialization.

Ai Weiwei, *Law of the Journey* — a giant inflatable boat referring to refugee crossings.

Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen* — on surveillance and on what it means to be visible or invisible.

Part 3. Social Art and Its Predecessors

Contemporary social art has predecessors: the critical realism of the nineteenth century and the social photography of the early twentieth.

In *The Stonebreakers* (1849) Courbet showed hard labor as worthy of major painting — Proudhon saw in this picture an example of "socialist art." From 1908 Lewis Hine photographed child labor in American factories and mines, and turned it into a problem that could no longer be ignored.

Socialist realism: the image instead of the fact

Soviet socialist realism also spoke of labor and collective life, but it depicted not the existing reality but an idealized image of it.

Soviet artists travelled on official creative assignments to construction sites, factories, and collective farms: they observed, made sketches, gathered material — the method already resembled research. But in the paintings the observations turned into an ideal: labor became heroism, the construction site a symbol of progress, the person a model builder of socialism.

One image or a construction

The predecessors of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century created a single image — a painting or a photograph. The contemporary artist builds the work from many elements: installation, video, text, documents, maps. To these are added the methods of sociology, ethnography, and history, archival research and documentary film. The multipart, multimedia form of such works goes back to the inventors of modern exhibition design in the 1920s and 1930s — El Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy.

Institutional social art shows not only the problem itself but its structure: who makes the decisions, what rules apply, which images we believe and why.

Socialist realism and contemporary social art

Here it is worth returning to socialist realism. The content is most often the opposite: socialist realism showed a new world under construction, while contemporary social art criticizes the existing one. But the structure is similar: state and foundation money, an approved range of subjects, a language one has to master in order to receive a grant or enter a biennial.

An artist who has mastered this language writes an application as confidently as a Soviet artist wrote about a creative assignment. The difference is that here criticizing your sponsor is not only permitted but expected — and that too is part of the language. Criticism of power, of capitalism, of colonialism, and of the institutions themselves is exactly what curators and grant committees are looking for. This is not a subversion of the system but its own expected language — just as "glorifying the state" was the expected language of Soviet applications.

Four Stages versus Four Worlds

In 1989 Alan Bowness gave a lecture that has been quoted ever since. He was then the director of the Tate Gallery, and before that a critic and an art historian who had curated Van Gogh, Rodin and Courbet, catalogued the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth, and administered her estate. Few people have occupied so many positions in the art world at once, which is what makes his account both authoritative and revealing.

He proposed that a modern artist arrives at fame by passing through four circles of recognition, in a fixed order: first other artists, then critics, then dealers and collectors, and last the general public. The model is precise, unsentimental, and it matches many careers of the twentieth century.

It also assumes something this text has been arguing against. In Bowness the four circles are stages of one journey. The artist starts inside the art school and ends inside public reputation, and each circle hands them on to the next. There is one destination, and the circles are the road to it.

The four worlds described here are not stages. They are parallel systems, each with its own full set of validators. An artist in the platforms world does not begin with peers and end with the public — the public arrives first, and for many careers it is the only circle that ever forms. An artist in the local world may complete all four of Bowness's circles: fellow members of the association, a review in the regional press, a dealer, a durable group of buyers. Nothing follows. The cycle closes and stays closed, because recognition earned there does not convert into recognition anywhere else.

This is the difference between a hierarchy and a plurality. Bowness describes a ladder; whoever climbs it arrives at the same landing. What I am describing is different ladders in four different buildings.

Bowness's map accurately described the territory visible to him. Its peers are art-school peers, its critics write for art magazines, its dealers show at fairs. This part of the art world has since become more global and more visible. But as I have argued, the other parts are equally important — and they are not waiting rooms for this one.

What Language Is It Speaking to You?

This text set out to describe four key worlds of contemporary art — each with its own rules, its own criteria of judgment, and its own language. I am not criticizing any of them and I do not prefer one over another: every system of support forms its own language — the market has one, social media has another, institutions have a third, the local art world a fourth. So when you encounter any work of art, it is worth asking yourself: which world does it belong to, and what language is it speaking to you?