

SCULPTURE MILWAUKEE
VISITING CRITIC LECTURE
FRIDAY OCTOBER 22, 2021
KENNY SCHACHTER

ART WORLD 3.0:GALLERY AND FAIR CONSOLIDATION, AUCTION ACTION, and WHAT'S A
NFT-ISM (AND SHOULD I CARE?)

MICHELLE GRABNER:

Good evening. I'm Michelle Grabner, one of the Guest Curators, along with Theaster Gates, of Sculpture Milwaukee's 2021 exhibition, *there is this We*. I'd like to welcome the members of both organizations that have made tonight's program possible: Sculpture Milwaukee and the Society for Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago. While Sculpture Milwaukee's primary initiative is to bring significant works of art to the streets of Milwaukee in an annual, freely accessible outdoor exhibition, and the SCA supports the Art Institute of Chicago through programming and the acquisition of works that enrich the museum's collection, our missions intersect with our shared commitment to engaging our communities in a dialogue about the art of our time, and actively supporting the artists of our time. It is in this spirit that we welcome Kenny Schachter tonight.

Known as a critic, art dealer, curator, educator, collector, and an artist in his own right, Schachter's years of experience across the contemporary art industry inform his collective practice. With this evening's talk, *Art World 3.0: Gallery and Fair Consolidation, Auction Action, and What's a NFT-ism (and Should I Care?)*, we'll hear about the current state of the art world and the art market, how they continue to evolve in the post-pandemic era, and what it means to participate in them.

Before we welcome Kenny to the podium, I'd like to thank Jennifer Cordileone and Jennifer Moon, the Executive Director and Associate Director, respectively, of the SCA, along with the SCA's President David Eglund and Programming Chair Patty Sternberg. I'd also like to thank Sculpture Milwaukee's Associate Curator, Bianca Bova, who suggested and arranged Kenny's visit and lecture, and the Saint Kate Hotel for hosting us this evening. Without the support of these individuals, tonight's program would not have been possible.

And now, please welcome Kenny Schachter

KENNY SCHACHTER:

I'll start with this image from the lobby of the hotel I'm staying at. And John Riepenhoff's work, who also is an artist, and owns the Green Gallery, which I also visited today. You will see when I get to what I came here to talk about, which is the art world today, October 22nd, 2021.

This is a sculpture that was really interesting. The piece is an art handler and is a pedestal. The sculpture itself is meant to showcase artworks. It is interesting because John owns galleries, and he is an artist. The artworld is a great place, it has given my life meaning and kept me alive when I have gone through ups and downs and personal tragedies, but it's also very frustrating at times, to be in the artworld.

I am sure John also suffers, since he seems to be a jack-of-all-trades like me. The title is *Art Handler* because it is a figure that is holding up a painting. And when you do different things in the artworld, it used to be that that was a kind of celebrated figure, historically. Someone who did a bunch of different things. Did them with love and passion.

I am self-taught when it comes to art, I never took an art class until I was teaching at the New School. I have been teaching for 30 years, I'm a professor at the University of Zurich, and at the School of Visual Arts. I taught at NYU last semester. But let me get back to where my day was today.

This was a piece in the Sculpture Milwaukee exhibition, which is spread throughout the city, that is curated by Michelle Grabner and Theaster Gates. And Bianca Bova, who invited me. Michelle tried to give an introduction but she had a few issues herself. This is the chaos that unfolds around me on a regular basis. This is a piece by Virginia Overton. People in the artworld have a tendency these days to forget to look at art. And so much of the rhetoric and dialogue that revolves around it is about the art. I came here with no expectations, because I rarely say no, but I could not have had a greater morning and afternoon looking at art spread throughout the city. This is a piece with objects stacked in traditional forms, and adds a whole other dimension not just of the city, and to the curbside, but to life.

This piece, by Jason Pickleman, an artist and a designer, is graphic and sculptural, and has a mission. There is one thing I care about when it comes to all of these different topics we will discuss. Art is a means of communication and it has enhanced every facet of my life.

Michelle, it is interesting we had a discussion in the car today and she was mentioning--I do not want to get her in trouble, I always get myself into trouble--but she was mentioning the fact that she herself has engaged

in a practice that covers different facets in the artworld, and that has not always necessarily been helpful to her. She is prolific in her writing, she operates an exhibition space, and has for decades. She is also a sculptor and an extraordinarily gifted painter. These are the beautiful paintings in Michelle's show at the Green Gallery that are so tactile and intricate. All painstakingly hand rendered. It was just an extraordinary exhibition, and Michelle is so humble, and did not tell us, when she had to pick something up from the gallery, that a show with a hundred of her works was up. It was absolutely fantastic.

I have also suffered throughout my career because I have done various things. Michelle mentioned that during the introduction, and you did not miss much when it came to the description of my life. Because I could not make a living any other way, and I was determined to have a life in the arts, I curated exhibitions and sold art from the exhibitions. That gave the artworld a reason to dismiss me, in essence.

We went to the Milwaukee Art Museum this morning, and I saw these amazing paintings by Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, unknown in his life. I love to learn, I love to see, and sadly looking at art seems to be among the least concerns of people engaged professionally in the artworld today. Everything is about young, fast money, fashion, but it seems the artworld has less, and less of a relationship to art.

Back to artworld 3.0 and where we are now. Excuse my little slideshow of my holiday in Milwaukee today. This is the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, and you see this paradigm that was really kind of effectuated in the artworld. This was the first time this clinical architectural environment was employed for experiencing art. Early on, the model of art galleries as we know them today, as I mentioned these exclusionary places where they are pigeonholing you and trying to put you in a box of if you are a collector, or curator, or an artist, it's about where you are situated in the divide in the art world.

Art galleries as we know them have been relatively short-lived. In the museum today was a big section of outsider artists, and untrained artists, artists that have had various hardships in their lives. And come from outside the typical mode of people in the fine art world. I always consider myself an outsider because I never studied art, and have no formal training, I just persevere. Of all of the fields I've worked in, (I've worked as a lawyer part time, I worked on the floor of the stock exchange, the fashion business, although you would never know from looking at me), strangely the art world is the most conservative industry out of any business I have ever been involved in. It is pretty damn annoying.
(Laughs)

So, from the early galleries, we segue into the model of the modern gallery, and art becomes from these little boutique galleries to this big international business. And industry. Which is very financially motivated. What we have had recently and some of the trends which is part of the topic for the discussion tonight, this is one of the changes that is afoot most recently. This was Gavin Brown, a British person who has had a gallery for 25 years in New York City. He began working at 303 gallery, and worked his way up independently curating, he was an artist as well. He ended up having this temple of art in his gallery, in Harlem, and it did not work. He could not support it. As a dealer he was a little bit arrogant, and antagonistic. It worked for a good long time, that type of mentality. It was kind of hubris to think that wherever I go, people will follow me. The artworld is pretty lazy, and nobody followed him up to Harlem to see his extraordinary space where he represented a lot of great artists.

As a result, he had to consolidate, meaning he had to close his gallery, and he took the directors chip with Barbara Gladstone. This was the onset of something we will see more and more of which is a period of consolidation in the contemporary art sector.

Most recently, Jeannie Greenberg combined with this gallery, one of the more commercially top, commercially successful galleries, Levy-Gorvy, one of most high-profile and successful dealerships. And Jeannie Greenberg had this extraordinary townhouse next to the Guggenheim Museum in New York. And yet they could not do it on their own. Which tells you that things are shifting in the whole machinations of the market, like I said before, I was so taken aback. Before I was introduced into the contemporary art world, and found out about the commercialization of art, I thought--I call myself an idiot idiot savant. I thought that art went from the studio of the artist and into a museum. I did not know you could buy art and own it personally, privately. Not till I was nearly 27 did I enter my first gallery. I went to see Andy Warhol's estate sale in '88, that is how old I am.

They were gearing up for a spring auction at the same time and I was flabbergasted to even understand that art could be transacted. And from there, I went directly to J.P. Morgan Chase to try to take out a loan. And they looked at me like I was a lunatic, turned their head sideways, and rejected me. But then I had the owner of the law firm I was a part-time employee of, they called up the bank and I got a loan to buy some art.

The artworld is a backward-looking universe. Now you have internationalization, you have dealers like Larry Gagosian who has 18 galleries, there is never a moment around the clock he does not have a gallery open somewhere. This is an art piece I made of an old age home.

Because why not that next? Hauser & Wirth, they have restaurants, hotels, they have organic farms, it is really art as a lifestyle.

So, we see that galleries are getting gigantic, galleries are very controlling. I have seen so many instances where it never ceases to take me aback, I have seen instances where galleries were literally misinforming artists, misinforming other galleries, because the only power they have is access. Who gets to buy art, coveted art people want.

The dealers will resort to making you buy art you do not want in order to buy art you do want. For instance, buy two pieces, and donate one to a museum, to get the pieces you are after. Galleries are resorting to becoming a branded lifestyle enterprise. There has been more growth in the art world in the past 25 years than in the past 250 years.

A lot of the shifts are terrible, but a lot of the shifts are really empowering and we will get to that point if I can get my slides to keep clicking. Relatively soon. This is Roberta Smith. As one of the only people in the world that renders me speechless every time I see her, I am so into all of her. Her writing prowess, and her husband, Jerry [Saltz] who is a good friend of mine. I remember someone waving around a *New York Times* back in the 90s, they were so elated that Roberta Smith had reviewed the show. It was one of the worst reviews I have ever read, but the gallery was so happy because Roberta has that weight as a writer.

And also, museums. Museums just do not wield the power that they once had. Most of them are suffering financially, the ongoing tragedy of COVID-19 has really desecrated the funding in museums. So much so they have loosened some of the regulations regarding art, and it is atrocious that museums want to engage in the art market by selling a really disgraceful amount of art, just in order to keep the doors open and pay staff, instead of being more industrious in how they could raise money.

Anyway, critics no longer have the teeth they used to have, and you see they certainly don't, and museums have been replaced by private museums in terms of who has the balls to raise prices, and create interest in emerging artists.

There is a recent book that came out by the amazing writer Georgina Adam, who writes for the *Financial Times* and the *Art Newspaper* about private museums, and interviewed me for the book, and for the most part, I said private museums are disgusting. You were wondering why I am getting into trouble. Technology wise and so forth. They give residencies to artists, they buy works for pennies on the dollar, and they promote the artist, and oftentimes, they are engaged in buying and selling art. That not many people are terribly aware of.

I just think that a private museum in a jurisdiction that does not have a public institution within a good large radius is great. To have a private museum in LA or New York, is atrocious. It is a zero-sum game and they are pulling away resources like the Broad Museum, which is comprised of all of these evening sale purchases, it takes away from the great institutions that have painstakingly built up constituencies over the years.

That is the reality of where we are today. Private museums are usurping the power and the audiences of public institutions, critics are losing influence to the market, and to these private museums. Now we will shift to the subject of art fairs.

Unbeknownst to most people, the very first contemporary art fair in the world was the Cologne Art Fair. Not Basel. This was to help jumpstart the market, this was 1967, jumpstart the commercial market in postwar Germany. They had the prices on the wall, and it was really a transition into a more boldly commercialized context shorn of the kind of intellectual discourse or educational component associated normally with art at that time.

That is a nice picture of a pipe organ with a booth in front of it at that fair in 1967. That fair was started by David Zwirner's father Rudolph, and it started a cycle that got to the point that there were 50 art fairs in the year 2000. And 360 in the year 2019. And 0 in 2020. Which was quite damn refreshing even though I happened to enjoy art fairs. But it got to the point where there were so many damn art fairs that back to this zero-sum game, that pervades much of the artworld, it was the galleries that were really suffering and I was guilty myself. I would more readily jump on a plane to go to a stupid art fair, when New York City has three or four different neighbourhoods with as many galleries as any city in the world, Lower East Side, Chelsea, Upper East side, all of those neighbourhoods are filled with hundreds of top-notch galleries, and at the same time, people get on the plane for the social aspect and the commercial side and go to fairs still.

People complain, we will get to NFTs of course, people complain about the environmental impacts and energy consumption that results from mining crypto but whoever countered the toll of shipping crates, airplane travel, erecting a temporary tent, electricity, hotels, etc.

People were just not going to galleries anymore. There was a decline of going to galleries because of the art fairs. This was an art piece I made when COVID-19 first happened. An art fair in a hospital. (Laughs) Which just really would not surprise me. If that was happening. I just enlarged the image, God knows what will happen now. (Laughs) Not much! Oh. Come on!

OK, so that is the art fair, now we are at a point where art fairs are just starting to get back on their feet, and resurrect. Recently there was the Armory fair in New York City, and the other fair has moved to November. They are giving subsidies to all the galleries because of lack of attendance, amazingly there were only 60 American galleries recorded attending in 2021, and there were no Asian galleries. It actually made for a much more pleasant experience walking around, without the usual crowds in a mad rush to see the art. Normally when there would be a fair, it is a giant whale swimming to the ocean and all these fishes are attaching themselves on the whales skin to feed off of it. In all of these fairs, it would not be unusual to have 15 or more art fairs popping up around the mothership of a fair like Basel or the Armory

I suffered from COVID-19 a year ago. I still have long-term effects. I never got my sense of smell back, my sense of taste is a little bit strange. I get headaches all the time. From my sickness came some extraordinary aftereffects not all of which were terrible. I did not wear a watch for months, I sat and looked at the drawings and paintings and sculptures in my house, I taught, I read, and all when we got to the point where everyone was running around in circles and nobody is looking at the art anymore. Which is why today was such a touching experience looking at art in the streets of Milwaukee and the Museum. These types of experiences were being lost on us from all of this chaos.

So, now we will jump to auctions. Auctions, historically, were professional. They were not this pornographic display of conspicuous consumption. Early on, a bunch of dealers would get together and form what is called the ring, and instead of competitively bidding on a piece and driving the price up, they would conspire to keep the price low, and after the sale they would bid amongst themselves to see who ended up with the picture.

In the '50s in London, there was a sale, a black-tie auction, and the Queen popped in. All of a sudden it was the dawn of an era of art becoming something almost other than art. I mean, why do people buy art? What does art mean to people? I got into a huge fight with somebody who tried to get me suspended for my position at *Artnet*, we got into a fight and I said to him, what does art mean to you? He couldn't come up with an answer other than money, which is sad.

Auctions became these things, something entirely separate from simply buying and selling art. People buy art for all types of different reasons. I always say, if there is someone who has never sold a piece of art in their collections, they are doing it right. People buy art for social cachet, to show off, to stick the art in the Freeport and use it as an

asset class. The Prince of Saudi Arabia bought this icon of Christianity for \$450 million. I think his reasons were more for whitewashing some negative PR, from killing journalists. People spend a lot of money on art for a lot of different reasons.

The first time contemporary art appeared in an auction was in 1973. Back then they called it the three D's, death, divorce, or debt. Auction house people would sit around having their many martini lunches, and wait for art to end up on their doorstep. That changed a lot in the way we will get into shortly.

Contemporary art never came up for sale in an evening sale until the late 90s. And in a very cynical way, which I do not mean to be flippant about, but there is a doctor, I always said he was the best art collector, because he stole money out of the coffers of a charity for children's heart surgery, to buy art. It was that important to him. When he went to jail, his collection was sold, and that was the first time that contemporary art entered an evening sale at auction. That was really the birth of the beginning of the market as we know it now. This was in the late half of the 90s, and since then, contemporary art has eclipsed old masters, even modern art, it is in infinite supply.

Instead of purposefully keeping the prices down at auction, now you have people that are hiking up the prices that collect 300 George Condos, and manipulate the prices to go higher and higher at auction. And then benefit from the results by selling to a rising demand and a momentum that was falsely generated.

One of those people in those images said, "when art is \$5,000, no one is interested, when it is \$50,000, people start to talk about it, and when it is half a million, everyone wants one." It is this psychological mentality that drives a lot of the actions. (Laughs)

This is a collector, Alain Servais, we got into a fight recently, he made a comment that he was interviewed during the fair and it said it was great there were no Americans at the fair, because all they did is talk about prices, and when they are in fair you cannot talk about art because they jump into booths and command the attention of the dealers to talk about money.

Idiots like this make such sweeping generalizations, dismissing an entire country. Looking at the museum in Milwaukee today shows the depth of culture in US institutions, all over the world. I was in Toronto recently to see an exhibition by Matthew Wong, an extraordinary collection in the museum.

This arrogance, this hubris, this mentality of elitism is really what annoys the crap out of me, from the first day I went to a gallery, 35 years ago, to today. It is people like this that pass themselves off as authorities in art, and how art makes his life so much better, and he is above anyone else who buys and sells art. It is pathetic, in a way.

As a result of this behaviour, anyway, back to this (Laughs). You have this kind of art world that is becoming increasingly dominated by conversations around money, social status, all of these different things. It used to be--there was another slide. There it is. God knows how many I have missed. If this is too confusing, you can send me a DM or email and I will try to make myself a little more clear.

I am so old, when I was young, a hamburger was five cents. If you wanted to communicate with me, one artist to another human being, you would have to send a sheet of these little 1 inch squares slides which I am sure you do not know what they are anymore. You would hold it up to the light, and that was the only way to express an image from one person to the other. Then, we had the advent of social media. I know you're there somewhere. (Laughs) This is one of the great stories in art. For me. And this painter.

I think Facebook started around 2006, Instagram started, I do not know. 2010 or something. Until the advent of smartphones and social media platforms, art was very much a really tiny enclave in the world. I remember a well-known artist back in the 90s wrote me this three-page letter, and said, how do I get a foothold in the system? What can I do? And I wrote back, and not to be an asshole, I said move to New York. There was no other recourse. If you want to get gallery representation and forge a career then live in New York, LA was not happening in the 90s to the extent it is now, London was not happening until the late 80s, and even now it is hanging on. There was no other place. So, all you could do was be in close proximity to the centre. And with the advent of social media, for me, it was nothing short of a revolution. It was this democratic wrecking ball that melted away geographical boundaries, and created access to the extent that never, ever existed. You could be in Asia, Africa, South America, anywhere in the universe. You could express what you are doing to other people. And get noticed.

This is an artist whose work I came across, 2 1/2 years ago. I just fell in love with her painting, technique, her sensibility, her sense of humour, this European painting tradition, and I remember writing her a letter and saying, who are you? Who is this naked woman that appears in many of your works?

I was interested in the biography of this person. She turned out to be 64 years old. She was a Hungarian living in Vienna. And since then, I bought a few works. It is such a misconception to think art is expensive. You could find extraordinary works of art for hundreds of dollars to this day. I bought some of her work, reasonably priced, and then proceeded to showcase her work in efforts I had undertaken over the years since.

Over those short two years we have known each other, she has been picked up by a gallery in Los Angeles where she had a monster sellout show. We have a two-person show in Athens together. Another in Holland, and one in New York right now, opening today as we speak. It is this extraordinary story where her life was absolutely turned upside down. It is also a mistake to think you have to be young, the new thing, to be successful and gain success in the art world.

This story touches me all the time. I think about it, and look at her work. She is an extraordinary human being, she has enhanced my life, and I have turned her professional life upside down. She calls me her muse, which I think is really cute. Come on, slides. Behave yourself. It is jumping over a fence every time.... Here we go. OK, so... exhausting. Why does this always happen to me? (Laughs) I do not know. It has been a curse over my head.

Instagram helped artists express themselves, and get noticed, but they still had to rely on the gallery system, and do not get me wrong, I love galleries and love to go to them all over the world, and went to a whole lot more, and I will never stop doing that again. About a year ago, I heard about non-fungible tokens. Back to the stories for where this ties together, I love art. I'm crazily passionate about art. It's all I care about besides family. It makes me weep, it makes me ecstatic, it brings me great, great joy even when the worst things happen (even worse than my slides not working) it makes me weep with happiness and sadness, and everything in between.

Instagram was a great way to have their works seen, but still, someone like me who is self-taught, someone who has written about art extensively, has written for books published by MIT, taught at Yale, taught a lecture at the Smithsonian, taught all over the planet for 30 years, still no one would ever take me seriously as an artist. I always say the artworld only knows the word "No." You cannot do this, or say this, it never changes. They love to dismiss you. Success affirms success, and these people get anointed as the next sensation, and it is a very closed universe which is really frustrating, and kind of awful.

I found out about NFT's this past September. I was introduced to someone that worked for a company which was a platform for NFTs, again, where

there is pure access. There is Nifty Gateway, and Superrare, and Makerspace, and Foundation, where you do have to get on board with someone.

Whereas Instagram was a way to express yourself, NFTs are a marketplace to sell your own work. I had a whole new group of people that wanted to beat me up and cancel me. I have become the evangelist for NFTs because my life is actually impacted in a really great way, like, NFTs offer artists the chance to take back some of the power away from the galleries, and push back on the control that is typically exerted on them. Not just to showcase their work and have it seen, but to develop a market. For me, I had been making digital art since the early 90s. I developed my own mode to have my work seen. I write every month, and would embed digital videos and manipulated photographic work into my articles. Every month I ended up having a one-person show. But I never could make a living off of my art. In 2018, I had a one-person show in New York, which was run by Joel Messler. He ran a gallery and was a painter so he thought it was funny to give me a tongue and cheek retrospective. I made money and it was a very satisfying experience. That came for my writing and embedding my work and my writing. I had another show in LA, and things were good, but I always dreamt, like, I wish I could make a living from doing what I love the most. And I was never able to do so.

Until I found NFTs. The first sale I had of my NFTs was last December, I made \$4,000 and I remember just thinking, that is so fantastic. I just made \$4,000 from selling my art to a whole new constituency of people. As far as cryptocurrency, I could not care less. I am a little mercenary when it comes to making a living and I do what I have to do for economic necessity to get by, but I never have done things I did not want to do. Not taking no for an answer for instance. Anyway, I had this one drop in December. Then I started to throw myself wholeheartedly into learning everything about the market. I had no interest in cryptocurrency, the \$2 trillion market capitalization of bitcoin, this immense amount of wealth was created from the ether. I had a second drop in February. I started studying, reading, and getting to know the community. I say NFTs are nothing. It is a digital certificate of authenticity that sits on the theory of cryptocurrency. I have not seen something like this since the early 90s, when I curated shows with my pals, and during a recession in New York that lasted from 1991 to 1996, and these great projects came out of the woodwork for all the right reasons, self-expression. My life has not been the same since. Last February, I had a job and I was expecting another \$4,000. Considerably more sold. Things backed off, and I made much less, but what I really appreciated was this new world. And the artworld pushed back. I think human nature generally is disdainful of change. It is a defence mechanism to recoil from something unfamiliar, and immediately, the dealers, almost 95% of the time they rejected this whole

notion of a marketplace that really enabled artists to take back some of the control, and the power away from the dealers that have exerted so much undue control over their lives.

I started to lecture, and I have written 10 or 11 feature articles on the subject, that are all accessible online. I gave a big lecture at the School of Visual Arts, which is online on YouTube. And I started to get like, hundreds of calls from people thanking me for helping them to do something I was never able to do for myself, until the last six months or so. That is to sell their own damn art and make a living, and as much as I am an egomaniac like the rest of us in the art world, I get a great amount of joy and satisfaction helping other people.

This was a stupid *Artnet* project I did when they erected a pay wall. You have to pay \$360 a year to read my writing now. It really annoyed me. I write not to make money, I write to be read. I like to be very transparent. I have had death threats, lawsuits, threats against me, I have had people try to beat me up in public, I do something that does not sit right with a lot of people. So I made this and told everyone "Jump the wall." I post all my writing for free on my website.

I have collected a lot of art over the years, and I sometimes sell it to make a living, and now I will sell my art. The idea was to sell--you have surely heard of crypto punks entities NFTs--I made a joke called crypto mutts. We are all mutts. I fail every day, I embarrass my kids on a regular basis. This was the first NFT I sold last December. I do not know how you feel about Donald Trump, but I was personally pretty glad he was gone.

I created this slide in Germany, this was back in January where I made some prognostications and said that NFTs were going to be something major. I wrote this in the *Art Newspaper*, and put it on Instagram, you can take a picture of it if you want to read it later. Anyway, on September twenty-first, I had my art in the art fair in Switzerland. This gallery called me up after I wrote this predictive article and said, can you tell us how to do an NFT show? And I said, "Hire me!"

I ended up curating this section of their booth and even had my own art in it, but I could not make it to the opening. Because I was working on selling those crypto projects.

Anyway, thank you for having me.

(Applause)

Live captioning by Ai-Media