

**January 2009:**

**SIMON HANTAÏ (1922- 2008) – ART AND THE COLLAPSE OF MARKETS**

“The art market is the greatest danger that modern art has had to face. Back in the early days, society contested and rejected the values of modern art, which made the situation of artists difficult. Now it pretends to support them by creating this market where money decides what art gets made. Our only defense is to refuse to participate. If I get involved with them, I’ll be finished. We cannot join on these terms. We have to stand outside.”\*

The whole world continues to follow the evolving story of the financial and market crisis that broke in September 2008. Harper’s Magazine (December 2008), in John Gray’s article, *Utopia Falls*, has gone so far as to compare its ideological significance to the collapse of Communism in 1989. Another event in that fateful month of September has, understandably, been less remarked. I am referring to the death of the painter Simon Hantaï in his Paris home at the age of 85 during the night of September 11. However, Hantaï established a singular position in the contemporary art world which raises some thought-provoking questions of relevance to our current economic predicament.

Hantaï is hardly a familiar figure to the international art world, based as it is on an American market model. In the contemporary art world, artists come to public attention through participation in this institutional system of the art market. The art market constitutes the exclusive doorway for an artist to establish the value of his or her work. Hantaï refused to walk through that doorway. Throughout his long career, Hantaï rejected any concession to the market as a measure of his work. In this art world where the market is the primary vehicle of presentation and definer of value, how was Hantaï to establish value? He would have to forego market validation and in its place assert the intellectual, aesthetic conviction of his painting. In 1983 Hantaï completely withdrew his work from the commercial art circuit to protest the ever-expanding dominance of its market-driven identity. He maintained that position for the remainder of his life, never allowing a commercial exhibition of his work. As a result, although famous in France, where he lived in exile from communist Hungary after 1948, Hantaï’s work was never promoted on the international scene. Today, people who follow the international art world, those who believe that the commercial art world represents contemporary art, and that financial exchange in the market defines the value of art, will ask *Who is Hantaï?*

When I raised this problem with the artist at the time he withdrew from the art market, saying to him directly, "You realize that for these people you will not exist?" his response was, "My painting has always existed." For those who understood Hantaï’s solitary stand in defense of a free creative life, his death, coming as it did on the very week-end that the market crisis was officially recognized, has great symbolic significance. It was as if the world had finally conceded to him and he was free to leave.

\* Simon Hantaï in conversation with the writer, early 1980’s

The statement above by Simon Hantai, in private conversation with me, was made twenty five years ago. At the time, and in the intervening decades, there was no public forum where that statement could have credibly been delivered. Art had simply become a commodity, made and exchanged according to the laws of consumer demand. More, it had become a vehicle of speculation and social leveraging. Everyone was making too much money to entertain anything but a market view. Andy Warhol's famous dictum that "business is the best art" seemed to have come true. In this environment, as Roberta Smith recently remarked in the New York Times<sup>1</sup>, the Sotheby's/Hirst sale of new work,<sup>2</sup> direct to the auction market, was an act of art-making in itself. However, now with the extraordinary world-wide collapse of markets, Hantai's statement has to be examined by anyone who is interested in the future of art.

The first part of Hantai's statement dealt with the situation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century avant-garde in Paris, when aesthetic innovation provoked animosity on the part of a new business class. Matisse and Picasso, at the time of Fauvism and Cubism, had few supporters and little money to live on. The same was true of the Abstract Expressionists in the forties and early fifties in New York. Hantai, an exile from Budapest, arriving via Italy penniless in Paris at the end of 1948, inherited this condition of financial hardship. However, with the beginning of a market for the work of young artists in New York in the 1960's, the situation began to change and by the 1980's, which Hantai refers to in the second part of his statement, artists could aspire to affluent celebrity status.

No one wants to live in poverty and we can be skeptical of setting up the myth of bohemian artistic life as an ideal. However, Hantai points out that in the first phase of modern art, the indifference and hostility of society, hard to endure though it may have been, left the artist relatively free to pursue aesthetic thought and maintain a dissident interrogation of social value. We owe an extraordinary line of modern artists, from Gericault and Courbet on down, to this phenomenon. Hantai then makes the key observation that in the second phase, that of market expansion, demand progressively determines supply. In other words, the collector, by his or her purchasing power, begins to influence and ultimately shape what gets selected and exhibited as the significant art of its time. The collector's taste, and not the artist's independent aesthetic intelligence, will end up defining art. It may not be impossible for an artist to pursue an aesthetic vision independent of popular taste. Hantai's example is proof that this can be done and there are other, though not many, such examples. However, it is extremely hard for such artists to gain recognition in an art world focused on a commercial agenda.

We may not, at first glance, see any problem with this situation. Why shouldn't people buy what they want? Hantai objected that if the art world was to be organized on market principles, it would mean the end of the enterprise of modern art and probably the return to an academic status quo very similar to what prevailed in the mid-nineteenth century. That is, in fact, what has happened. Today, it is as hard for a major artist to gain understanding for his art as it was for Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cezanne at the end of the nineteenth century. In our contemporary society, great art continues to languish in neglect.

Modern art was born out of a new philosophical and aesthetic vision of the world. The notion of the 'avant-garde' initially sprang from an aspiration for political freedom. The art that took form in order to explore this new vision abandoned the rules of traditional representation and undertook to reinvent line and color. The early viewers of this art often responded with aversion and outrage because they sensed that new feeling and thought, which conflicted with the habits of their outlook, were being created. Nietzsche's exhortation to create new values and Freud's redefinition of rationality held out the promise of a whole new cultural model. To have a sense of how this intellectual vision penetrated art, one should turn to the personal statements and writings of the Abstract Expressionists. They were clear in their minds that they were in the process of inventing a new 'subject' of art. The essential act in this search was to take the figure out of the painting. This question of the presence and absence of the figure is central to the intellectual meaning of modern art. It should not come as a surprise, then, that one of the leading contemporary commercial art businesses in New York should have a policy of showing no abstract art because, as one of its executives put it, "we do not want to have to explain anything to our clients".

The commercial art world of the sixties quickly identified intellectual aesthetic content in art as its enemy. However, modern art is irrevocably anchored in intellectual meaning. If you remove it, you are left with a charade. When Hantaï made the decision to withhold his work from the commercial art world, he stated in an interview to the French newspaper *Le Monde*: "I withdrew from the center, because the ambition to occupy a position at the center of things has no meaning. It prohibits you from maintaining an independent vision". Perhaps it is worth comparing this statement with another by the former Citigroup chief executive Charles Prince 3rd. While discussing the recent market boom, he declared<sup>3</sup>: "As long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance." Two fundamentally different cultural outlooks.

The predicament in which we now find ourselves offers a rare opportunity to look back and consider the history of modern art. We have a choice between an art of market motivation or one of intellectual and aesthetic motivation. The former will inevitably lead to the collapse of value, while the latter will lead to its renewal.

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(1) Smith, Roberta. "After the Roar of the Crowd, an Auction Post-Mortem." *The New York Times* 20 Sept., 2008, Art, new york ed.: B7

(2) "*Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*," Sotheby's, London. Sept. 16-17, 2008

(3) Nocera, Joe. "Playing the Odds: Did Risk Managers Outsmart Themselves?" *International Herald Tribune* 3-4 Jan., 2009, Weekend Business