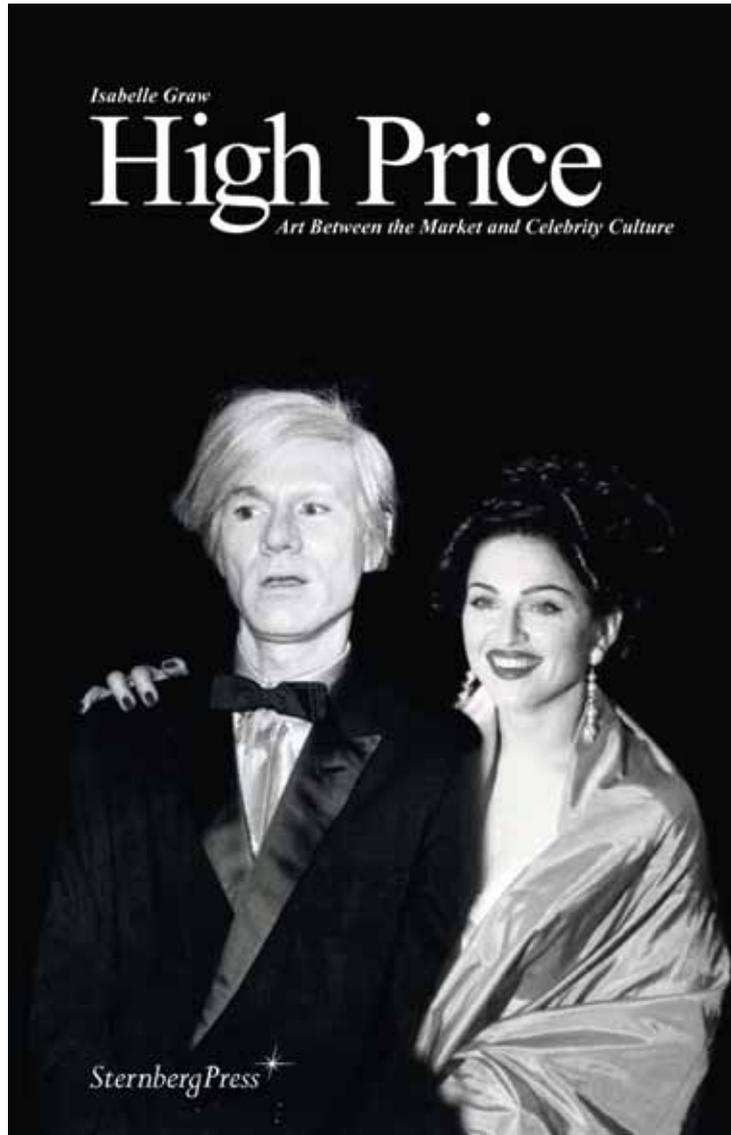


ARTICLE: Price Point

WORDS: Liang Luscombe



High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture
 Author: Isabelle Graw
 Cover artwork by Markus Weisbeck
 Image courtesy Sternberg Press

Isabelle Graw is a Berlin-based art critic and author of *High Price: Art between the market and celebrity culture*, published in 2009 by Strenberg Press. She is the co-founder of art journal *Texte zur Kunst* in Berlin and professor at Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste (Städelschule).

Liang Luscombe — What were the circumstances and motivations for writing *High Price*? Obviously there was an art boom in the US and Europe at the time, but what were the additional reasons?

Isabelle Graw — I had always been struck by the way that art critics and art theorists from the left, like myself, consider the art market as an evil other, as something they of course have nothing to do with and they are certainly not implicated in. I wanted to go against this simple polarisation between ‘art’ and ‘the market’ and show instead how they can’t be strictly separated; nor reducible to one another either. Think only of how economic pressures have historically always reached into artistic practice on the one hand. On the other hand, art can’t be reduced to economic factors either. I guess that I had a practical sense of both the irreducibility of art *and* the economic subtext of art making, from having closely worked with artists and from having thought about art theoretically for a long time.

In the beginning of the millennium, I was even more irritated by the behaviour of many agents of the market who increasingly believed the market to be an arbiter of art. This authority attested to market decisions was something that certainly intensified during the last art boom that you just mentioned. Many members of the art world subscribed to its value system and tended to respect artists just for the reason that their work sold well and thereby confused economic value with artistic value. This is of course not a new phenomenon — you only have to go back to a nineteenth-century artist like Gustave Courbet in order to realise that high prices are able to make an impression and tend to be (wrongly) equated with aesthetic

quality. I wanted to insist on the right of the critic to object to market decisions. And I wanted to go against an idealist belief in art that represses its economic subtext.

LL — In the book you describe a kind of struggle between the symbolic value of an artwork and its market value, could you talk a little bit more about the disjunction between these two types of value and how they intersect?

IG — The value of an artwork is not the same as its price: we attribute value to it if we consider it worthy of our attention, if we consider it worth speaking and thinking about. For value to get attributed to a work of art, it first of all needs to be linked to an author. It is the signature of an author that allows for the attribution of value to take place. But, once attributed to an author, the artwork also gets somewhat internalised and personalised. One example for this quite literal personalisation occurs in the commercial auction sphere when artworks are called by the name of their producer (‘a Hirst’, ‘a Koons’). The attribution of value here goes hand in hand with the turning of the artwork into a quasi-person.

However there are more values than the value in the sense of artistic relevance or worth. It was Bourdieu who distinguished between the symbolic and the market value for art commodities — a distinction that I consider quite helpful, despite the fact that the terms ‘symbolic’ and ‘market value’ are very general. But they nevertheless allow us to capture the peculiar double character of artworks as commodities. Once they circulate on the art market they are somewhat split between their market and their symbolic value. Now while market value is easy to assess — it is expressed by the price of an artwork — the concept of symbolic value is harder to grasp. This is because the symbolic value of an artwork consists of many things, starting from the historical claims that have been made for art since the eighteenth century, up until the claims made by critics and art historians for certain artworks. While Bourdieu assumed

a clear separation between market and symbolic value, I wanted to demonstrate how they are interrelated.

Symbolic value is the precondition for market value to occur — an artwork has to be considered meaningful in order for it to attain high prices. Only the boom years have shown to us, that the commercial market is able to create ‘meaning’ on its own, it doesn’t need critics to provide symbolic meaning. Many artists — such as Anselm Reyle — have operated successfully in the commercial sphere without being supported by critics or art historians. Does this mean that market value can be established without symbolic value? Not in the long term I think. I therefore argue in *High Price* that even economically successful artists who were ignored by critics and art historians need symbolic value at some point because it provides a desperately needed sense of ‘substance’ to market value.

LL — I’m particularly interested in your thoughts on the artist who is also a critic (a category that I admittedly fall under). In the book you propose that the artist’s expanded profile as potentially art/critic/gallerist/curator is means for the artist to be more marketable and very closely reflects the post-Fordist mode of production. While I would agree that this is a reflection of a post-Fordist condition, I would argue that this kind material and immaterial production of the artist/critic is deeply rooted in avant-garde movements and can be seen across Constructivism, Surrealism and Conceptual Art. This dualism is as old as El Lissitzky, André Breton or Daniel Buren. Can their contributions to critical thought be discounted on the grounds of artistic self-interest? I see writing as a means to develop conversation without being a maker of a marketable object.

IG — The fact that artists insist on producing discourse as well — something that has been fought for by the historical avant-gardes — is of course a historical accomplishment that I would never want to fall behind. I am not arguing for a return to an (imaginary) strict division of

labour — far from it. I am simply asking for a higher awareness of the resulting conflict of interests that have increased since the last art boom. In my book, I don’t question the enlarged competence profile that results from artists considering meaning production as an integral part of their work — such as Duchamp, Buren or Jutta Koether. What I find problematic is the emergence of a new type of artist-critic-curator who tends to write catalogue texts about those artists that she will either show or even sell if she operates as a dealer as well. These types of conflicts of interests are never addressed — they are somewhat naturalised in the art world. I think that it should at least be mentioned, that curators showing the work that they have promoted as a critic comes close to insider trading. I also wanted to question the ‘progressive’ nature of wearing many hats. While wearing many hats was often considered to be a challenge against restricted notions of identity, we have to realise how it nowadays corresponds to the more general norm of multi-tasking and role-switching.

LL — With Australia’s art market being small, I wonder whether the Australian art industry exists in a bubble in which these market relations that you speak of affect us to a much lesser degree. Australian artists often travel to international biennales and art fairs to get a better sense of the European and US art worlds, and in turn these art markets. We are constantly looking outward. With this kind of peripheral experience, does the artist’s relation to the art market change or do you think the relations that you have written about still apply?

IG — When writing my book I was interested in theorising the relationship between art and the market; I was less interested in telling the story of how it feels to be an artist under changed economic conditions. Nevertheless, it is often read as if it offered a way out or possible plans for actions. While I would admit that the empirical changes I describe are particular and based on observations that I made in places like New York, London

or Berlin, I would hope that its theoretical propositions hold up and have a more ‘universal’ resonance.

LL — When reading *High Price* I was reminded of attending the 2010 Melbourne Art Fair and seeing the kinds of overlap between the knowledge market (public institutions, publications, biennales and *Documenta*) and the commercial art market (commercial galleries and auction houses) taking place within the art fair. The Melbourne Art Foundation (the not-for-profit arm of the Melbourne Art Fair) had invited independent and experimental spaces to exhibit in the Fair’s project rooms. These included publicly funded galleries Gertrude Contemporary and Campbelltown Arts Centre, and artist-run space TCB art inc. Could you speak a little more about the increased blurring of these two markets and the implications of this?

IG — I think that there are two things happening at the same time: while the commercial art market needs to integrate the knowledge market in order to create symbolic meaning and thereby a foundation for economic value, it also can do without intellectuals or alternative spaces on many occasions. The examples you have mentioned are indicative of the first development: art fairs trying to make sure that discussion happens and that new spaces (they have to be regarded as ‘hip’ though) are represented. This doesn’t mean though that all independent and experimental spaces can count on getting an offer to participate in an art fair — there needs to be a general agreement among the jury that the space is culturally relevant. While some are included, most remain excluded. I have recently participated in several events — such as gallery dinners organised by economically powerful galleries — where I noted a total absence of theorists and intellectuals, let alone representatives of self-organised spaces. This is true for the auction sphere as well — which I would describe as a zone free of intellectuals, apart from the in-house art historians and old-school connoisseurs.

LL — Your book describes reflexive work of artists such as Andrea Fraser in which she takes up the conditions of the market in order to critique them. The work of Tino Seghal has taken much from Fraser’s practice, how would you describe and place Seghal’s form of market and institutional critique?

IG — *High Price* offers some examples of what I call ‘market reflexive gestures’. It doesn’t claim to be complete in this respect — many other artists would have deserved to be mentioned as well, but I had to opt for a restricted number of case studies. This said, Andrea Fraser happens to be one of my favourite artists! In contrast to Tino Seghal, she takes it upon herself to reflect the conditions of a market that wants all of us — body and soul. Tino Seghal has used other people — museum guards, actors, dancers — who act out his program. When I have watched his performances — which are not dematerialised as often claimed because bodies consist of matter as well — I can’t help but think that they happen at the expense of others. It is his actors who get exposed and made vulnerable, not him. Furthermore, while you can’t purchase a material object, you can sign a contract and thereby acquire the right to re-enact and exhibit these performances. This means that collectors are granted an artistic authority, which is more than they could hope for. When re-enacting these performances, the collector also gains direct access to Seghal’s actors, their bodies and their affects — a kind of bio-political dream. In short, what is seemingly withheld turns out to be the currency most desired in our new economy.

Liang Luscombe is a Melbourne-based artist and writer, and Sub-editor of *un Magazine*, volume 6.