# Blurred Lines: Contradictions between the Art and Those Who Sell It

8/6/2015

Alex Spangher

Gregoire Vogelsang, founder of Art Gallery in New York (now based in Brussels, Belgium), sells work from a cadre of young painters and photographers who challenge traditional notions of gender and sexuality in their work.

Take, for instance, Cecile Plaisance, an artist Vogel promotes, who creates lenticular art focused on Barbie dolls as her subject. Move right or left and the mirages shift; Barbie is cast from professional garb into various stages of undress. An “unadmitted twinkle to self-exploited women,” Plaisance says, her artworks “challenge women of today to defend their rights, desires and maintain their gained freedom.”

Yet, move to the right or left, and this progressive-minded veil quickly decomposes. At the ArtHamptons 2015 New York Art fair, a high-end sales opportunity, Vogelsang brought a different cadre to sell the work: models who were tall, white and blonde, who barely knew about art but were told to stand still and hold signs. And he sold a lot of work.

(Two assistants involved in sales at the fair described the scene. They requested anonymity to avoid alienating themselves from the tightly knit art world. Vodelsang did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

The open doors that many women experience in the Contemporary Art often open to a short road. “Often, these younger women are hired for one purpose, and don’t make it into the higher ranks,” says Olav Velthius, an assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam who studies art markets.

Sherry Tsang, 22, experienced this herself. “I spent all my time [at Milk Studios] carrying in boxes and spending 5-6 hours a day outside in the cold, opening doors for VIPs. It was exciting, they told you, to be part of the experience. But you weren’t, you weren’t part of the experience.” Milk Studios didn’t respond to emails and phone calls.

Hiring attractive sales assistants in any field is not new, nor even surprising. “It’s the oldest game in town,” says Jim Kempner, owner of Jim Kempner Fine Art Gallery in Chelsea, New York. (He followed up by saying that his staff is small, and takes on multiple roles, he takes other considerations into account besides attractiveness when hiring.) However, the emphasis on conventional, sexualized beauty in Contemporary Art marketing is notably contradictory, as Contemporary Art artists often explicitly question standard notions of beauty and social roles.

“I wish someone told me, before I started, that I didn’t fit the physical mold of the field, and that the only place for me was in the back room,” says a former assistant who requested anonymity to protect her relationships in the field. “My director told me to be on the lookout for assistants to match the walls: white and blonde. Knowledge of the artwork was secondary.”

To be fair, this does not characterize the experience of all assistants, especially those in small galleries that require their assistants to take on many roles. It was so for Jerry Saltz, a senior art critic for New York Magazine, who started working at Phyllis Kind’s Gallery after working as a trucker in Michigan. “An art gallery saved my life. I had no degree, no skills, just a need. I unpacked boxes, and set up shows. It was a way to be in the art world, breathing art seeing people.”

“There are different segments of galleries — the bigger galleries have a more fine-grained division of labor. Here, physical attractiveness is important, especially for receptionists,” says Velthius.

Some of the labor stratification and disposability many women feel may be due the competitiveness of the field. “There seem to be no shortage of young people interested in going into the art world,” says James Danziger, director at Danziger Galleries, a mid-size gallery in Chelsea. “The last time we advertised for a gallery assistant job (about a year ago) we had over 100 applicants.”

Danziger has chronicled the appearance and effect of public-facing assistants in mega-galleries in an exhibit called “Sentry”. Assistants in mega-galleries are often placed in a way to create an “architecture of intimidation,” Danziger says, to create the feeling of a “club that won’t let people in.” Youth and beauty is a necessary part of this formula.

“I look around my gallery,” said one assistant working at a large gallery on the Upper East Side who asked not to be named in fear of reprisal at work, “and I notice that we’re all in our 20s, female, and white.”

Again, the irony is this uniformity and exclusivity is not extended to the art itself.

According to David Halle, a sociologist at UCLA and author of *New York’s New Edge*, a book detailing his extensive surveys of gallery directors and audiences, curators once had to enforce certain styles to promote their brand within a competitive buyer’s market—think Jazz art in the 1920’s, or Pop Art in the 1950’s. But currently, with art spending at historic highs, curators now brand as Contemporary Art “anything made by an artist who is still alive, or recently deceased.”

It is encouraging to see dealers embracing an inclusive range of different artistic styles, and supporting artists that push bold messages.

However, they seem to live in an internal world of contradiction that undermines the very art they are trying to sell.