

# WHAT IS INFLUENCE?

At a time when “influencer culture,” inextricably tied to consumerism and the rise of technology, is facing an inevitable decline; when the hierarchies between high and low, authentic and fake, mainstream and minority, are experiencing a seismic shift in collective representation; and when the world’s geopolitical order is undergoing a profound mutation and facing unexpected challenges, this survey affirms the urgency to propose a new critical reading of the notion of “influence.” To follow, four newly-commissioned essays offer four perspectives on influence as legacy, currency and agency—all the while examining art’s own influence on society, and vice versa.

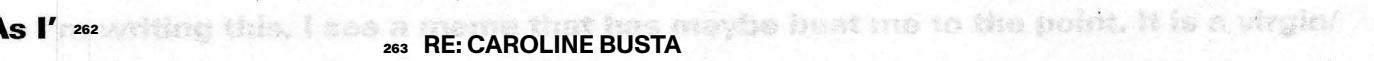


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to distill these truths as objects that future generations might inherit and inspect, almost like time capsules. The job of art institutions, meanwhile, has been to care for these truths and to organize them into coherent narratives. To be an art collector was to signal not just wealth but socially progressive values. In a vacuum, the cultural capital of art patronage was underwritten by an ostensible close proximity to the “truth” of our time. But culture doesn’t happen in a vacuum, and this system, in recent years, seems to have broken down. Even “art” itself seems to no longer work as it once did. Has art lost its influence? Why?

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<sup>262</sup> RE: CAROLINE BUSTA

dominance); at left, Marina Abramović appears as the “Virgin 20th Century Artist”; at right, the image is mostly dark, as if an antenna were obscuring the photographer’s lens and suggesting that “Dead 20th Century Artists” is the POV of a meta-viewer watching the spectacle. For her part, Abramović appears small, dressed in a red gown.

The image is a screenshot from *She’s VR* (2019), a work meant to be experienced wearing a Hololens 2 (Microsoft’s own Windows Mixed Reality VR headset), wherein Abramović, playing off her 2018 digital performance for MoMA, *The Artist Is Present*, virtually appears before the viewer. Text overlaid on her side of the screen are the “Virgin” **INFLUENCING THE VOID** stuff, “reads books,” “interrogates subjects,” “the

“the” **“The art world is cyclical by nature, a full revolution lasting about as long as an Artforum editor’s tenure: Ingrid Sischy (1980–’88), Jack Bankowsky (1992–2003), Tim Griffin (2003–’10). Yet despite the rise and fall of certain stylistic trends and conceptual discourses, the overarching cultural phenomenon of “art”—as in contemporary art, “art world” art, the kind of art that appears in biennials, fills the halls of major museums and, later, possibly, the coffers of secondary-market dealers—has remained more or less consistently influential on culture sector gatekeepers throughout modernity.**

**Art was the form through which the historical avant-garde revealed the truths of society; the stage on which oppressive norms were undone and double standards were skewered; the site where, from the work of Hans Haacke to that of Hannah Black, structural inequalities were laid bare. We loved Duchamp because he proved, as if in a court of law, that the value of art was socially determined. We loved Warhol because he distilled the creative power of Madison Avenue (advertising), using its language to show both the seduction of post-war consumerism and its emptiness. We fell for him even harder because he didn’t morally judge this language (nor, by extension, us), but instead glorified it, revealing how beautifully bizarre we look consuming things and selling ourselves through advertising’s lens. And we loved Damien Hirst, or at least the market did, because his work corroborated that virtually anything (living or non) could be killed/extracted, vitrined and placed in a freeport to operate as a tax-free store of value to appreciate with time.**

**ABSTRACT**  
to distill these truths as objects that future generations might inherit and unpack, almost like time capsules. The job of art institutions, meanwhile, has been to care for these truths and to organize them into coherent narratives. To be an art collector was to signal not just wealth but socially progressive values. In a vacuum, the cultural capital of art patronage was underwritten by an ostensible close proximity to the “truth” of our time. But culture doesn’t happen in a vacuum, and this system, in recent years, seems to have broken down. Even “art” itself seems to no longer work as it once had. Has art lost its influence? Why?

As I’m writing this, I see a meme that has maybe beat me to the point. It is a Virgin/Chad format (contrasting two subjects and their respective attributes of weakness/dominance): at left, Marina Abramović appears as the “Virgin 20th Century Artist”; at right, the image is mostly dark, as if an onlooker were obscuring the photographer’s lens and suggesting that “Chad 21st Century Artist” is the POV of a meta-viewer watching the spectacle. For her part, Abramović appears small, dressed in a red gown. The image is a screengrab from *The Life* (2019), a work meant to be experienced wearing a HoloLens 2 (Microsoft’s new Windows Mixed Reality VR headset), wherein Abramović, playing off her 2010 durational performance for MoMA, *The Artist Is Present*, virtually appears before the viewer. Text overlaid on her side of the meme are the “Virgin” attributes: “believed in stuff,” “reads books,” “interrogates subjects,” “their image and lore is going to be reanimated and resold in perpetuity.” Meanwhile, the Chad text reads, “commodifies their identity and presence, becomes CEO of their own image, hires [poor] art school grads to research and make anything else” and “monopolizes the ability to reanimate and resell the ghost of 20th century art in perpetuity,” among other lines. To be clear, the Chad isn’t “right.” Neither is it “wrong.” The Chad represents a kind of Darwinian reality, specifically that of present-day (let’s forget the “late” already) capitalism. The Chad makes a reactionary claim to nature (“might is right”) that the Virgin doesn’t fully grasp.

Bracketing off, for a moment, the hyperbolic nihilism of this setup, we must acknowledge that it does tell the truth. The Virgin as 20th-century art star believes it has agency, believes its value is derived through its interrogation of subjects, its experiential and academic knowledge, its technical skill, its sacrifice. The Chad 21st-century artist, meanwhile, understands that the art market (in all its various forms, including tech and other corporate collaborations) cares only that it claims and leverages such things as “artistic subjectivity,” “criticality” and “canonical reference”; cares only that such things are available for plausible defense of a work’s value. More cynically, the market values the Chad artist’s work precisely because it mirrors how so much of the finance sector has operated since the new century began.

As is usually the case with memes, the creator of this one is anonymous. (I first saw it posted by thinker/artist Mat Dryhurst on Twitter in response to a tweet by theorist Benjamin Bratton, who was eyerolling at the inanity of Abramović’s “mixed reality” Hololens2 piece and that Christie’s and Microsoft would be co-promoting it as “art.”) Both in its simplicity and market-resistant anonymity, the Virgin/Chad artist

schema lays bare the dynamics of contemporary artistic production as elegantly as any given historical avant-gardist has in eras past. Let’s then start with the premise that this is actual art, and that the question is not whether art has lost its influence, but rather when and how art became uncoupled from the “art world” that once supported it. When and how did the art world lose the thread? In short form, one need look no farther than the most recent Art Basel UBS Market Report (finalized during Q4 of 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). The remarks of one unnamed dealer stand out: “2020 will be a challenging year [...] rather than major political dramas having a direct financial impact, their main danger for us is to distract people’s attention. Distractions and anxieties can take people away from buying art, even if the economy is booming and they’re still in a position to spend.” If what this dealer says is indeed broadly felt, it would seem that art’s biggest problem right now is... reality? Against the backdrop of the world—which the West has been experiencing as a kind of global narrative collapse—art-world art cannot compete. Quaint and slow at best, wasteful and myopic at worst, art-world art is actively reinforcing political norms and social behavior that only further compound the failure of the liberal center, climate change, and rising wealth disparity. Future historians may mistakenly name 2016 (citing the destabilization of mainstream media, the first Brexit referendum and Trump’s election) as the point at which the art world started to come undone. But the dissolution of generational art movements and regional scenes over the past decade, along with the dwindling cohesion of biennial-scale exhibitions, the decline in quality and volume of art media, art fair exhaustion, the consolidation of the blue-chip market, and the value spike in gatekeeper-befuddling KAWS-style art, attest to the fact that art-world influence has been post-peak since at least the early ‘10s.

How did this happen? The tl;dr can be summed up by a screenshot the artist Joshua Citarella posted to Instagram in late December: three sentences typed into his Notes app that began, “Financial Recovery from 2008 flowed almost entirely upward and enriched a new collector class. Social media hastily remapped visibility within the art world. These changes destabilized the market [...].” Citarella is part of a small cohort of artists and creatives (along with Brad Troemel and Daniel Keller, as well as designers such as Telfar and HBA’s Shayne Oliver, and others in the DIS-magazine-adjacent sphere) to have come up in the twilight of the trad art world (i.e., when the logic of the “Virgin 20th-century artist” still held) by analyzing its demise and the vast arena of extraterritorial cultural criticism beyond.

In a sense, that’s all one needs to know. Art used to tell the truth; this is both what made it art and made it valuable. Then sometime around 2008, when quantitative easing (i.e., zero-percent interest rates) compelled those with available cash to disproportionately invest in art as an alternative asset, art-world art lost its “truth” edge. Ever since, art critics, curators and artist communities have had about as much sway on the actual value operations of the art world as the people holding cardboard signs at a mass protest do on the workings of corporate multinationals. Artists could

either comply with the industry and enjoy proximity to its riches (the illusion of class mobility) or consign themselves to relative precarity and the microcelebrity of making the most damning banner to legitimize it?

Perhaps this moment marked a schism in contemporary art. On the one hand, there were those who sought to rectify the art world's over-capitalized ground, returning it, open letter by theory-filled open letter, to some sort of social democratic arcadia. (Cue the Virgin fighting the Chad in vain.) Along with this position of resistance was also often the tacit expectation of social validation, publicity, and a meritocratic claim to funding. On the other hand, there were those who had shifted to a position of (to borrow an anthropocene analogy) resilience or even relinquishment. The art world would crash and burn, they would still be artists, albeit ones self-funded via an array of odd jobs and investments, and would now be free of all parasitical relationships to an elitist industry. (Cue not the Chad, but the meme-maker.)

"the ghost of 20th century art in perpetuity." Oscar Murillo did this perfectly. For Simchowitz and the collectors who bought the works he put up for auction, the financial goal was to render art an asset that would out-appreciate standard securities at a time when interest rates were at an extreme low. Even by the time of the 2008 financial crash, one was likely to receive better and more satisfying engagement by participating in a public demonstration (e.g., Occupy Wall Street) than penning an art review or making a show. It should therefore be no surprise that in the 2010s so much art turned to old-school leftist forms of protest as its primary product. For one, public demonstrations and open-letter writing are easily legible gestures of speaking truth to power. Two, these mediagenic actions guarantee some modicum of attention (the novelty of all of museum's workers collected in the building's atrium is more attention-grabbing than a piece of artistic research explaining through archival materials the devaluation of culture sector work). And three, this activity is performatively non-elitist, allowing those involved to imagine their actions aligned with the concerns of the working class. Said another way, these 1960s-style (aesthetically Godardian in their ideal) strategies of dissent created the perception of cultural value: they fought for a truth and garnered attention in doing so—and the supposed right to this value by performing solidarity with other precarious sectors.

But this path for art also demonstrates a key failure of the art public's imagination: not only is the format regressive and nostalgic, but it also seems to misunderstand how power works and where artistic agency actually resides. We need only recall Trump's response to the global Women's March against the legitimacy of his presidency, which took place the day after his inauguration in 2017. Trump applauded the four-million-plus American participants, tweeting about their collective action as a wonderful expression of American democracy. Similarly, the majority of art-world protests, which tend to be acute and visually striking but rarely lead to any true systemic change, serve foremost to reinforce romantic ideas among detached collectors about artists being "radical." The question then arises: who are these demonstrations for? And furthermore, at what point did the artist's role shift from one of interrogating how the world works to one of saving it? To be clear, I'm not saying that artists shouldn't be activists—the more activists the better, and indeed, some

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artist-led activism has been both brilliant and effective (e.g., P.A.I.N.'s Nan Goldin-led anti-Sackler campaign). But why is the art world currently so dependent on its adjacency to activism to legitimize it? (Read Michael Sanchez's "Contemporary Art Daily," published in *Art & Subjecthood* (Sternberg Press, 2011).)

**Collecting**, this is another major fork. On the one hand, content producers and academics refused the technological turn, citing its negative effect on art; on the other,

The answer to that question may be tied to the shift in collecting that is perhaps epitomized by independent dealer-collector Stefan Simchowitz, who gained notoriety in the early '10s for puffing up a wave of "zombie formalism" (painting that shared the aesthetics of late-20th-century abstraction but lacked the political context in which the historical works were formed), only to flip the art for fast cash. Some of Simchowitz's artists (playing the Chad artist) adapted to what the market wanted and learned to extend their career by, per the meme, "monopolizing the ability to reanimate and resell the ghost of 20th century art in perpetuity." Oscar Murillo did this perfectly.

Meanwhile, for Simchowitz and the collectors who bought the works he put up for auction, the financial goal was to render art an asset that would out-appreciate standard securities at a time when interest rates were at an extreme low.

As the decade progressed, a related phenomenon could be found in large galleries, which, calibrating their roster to the identitarian demands of post-2016 art protests, began taking on the back catalogs of older artists, particularly women or non-white artists who, until the mid-'10s, had seen little stage-center movement with their careers. (Read: artists whose work was both in abundant supply and relatively inexpensive to purchase at auction, promising a large margin for value appreciation.) I am not saying that the work of these older artists isn't valuable in cultural terms; indeed, it represents all of the good-feeling values the Virgin artist believes should be upheld. It's just not plausible that the sudden spike in market value is correlated with this art revealing any larger truths of our time. What it is doing, on a macro scale—and the same goes for the majority of art world art now—is acting as a surface for hyper-valuation via a nexus of inner-left micropolitics and the financial goals of the gallery.

And yet, popular Internet in theory had never been stronger! Facilitated by YouTube, Digitality, filesharing, the Internet was overflowing with Foucauldian takes on the logic of surveillance culture, body politics underpinned by the thinking of Paul B.

There is also Citarella's second point to consider: "social media hastily remapped visibility," which was acutely experienced across the culture sector and met with an immense amount of pushback from the art world. On balance, there was widespread resistance among the art world to screenspace, digitality and speed; even in 2020, there is a continued insistence on the IRL experience of art, the publication of long-form exhibition catalogue essays and a preciousness around print. Seeing as this response demonstrates solidarity with the systems by which the art world has long been ordered (and, subjectively, may be more enjoyable), it is completely understandable—but it is nevertheless the stance of the Virgin, as it is a position overpowered by the fact that dealers (acting here as Chads tuned to the laws of the market) have been actively optimizing their galleries to be featured on digital

aggregators like Contemporary Art Daily and pre-selling the contents of their art fair booths by PDF since the moment it was technically possible to do so. (For an excellent contemporaneous account of this transition read Michael Sanchez's "Contemporary Art, Daily," published in *Art & Subjecthood* [Sternberg Press, 2011].)

In my view, this is another major fork. On the one hand, content producers and academics refused the technological turn, citing its negative effect on art; on the other hand, the demands of the market required gallerists to adapt to the new technological landscape. Paradoxically, gallerists had much better luck selling work that remained aloof to digitality or engaged with it only pictorially—collectors in the 2010s wanted easily legible links to the 20th-century canon, which promised better returns at auction—and nothing looked better in screenspace than painting. Behold the canvas' flat surface photographed against a white wall under cool florescent light, the artist's precious marks distilled as a hi-res JPEG suspended on a clean white website, directly adjacent to the reassuring words of a good writer's art historically and philosophically robust prose. In this dynamic, Virgin artists—often in tandem with their "art & protest" activity—were encouraged to continue working as they had. Protected by their Chad dealers, they maybe even believed that their practices were testaments of resistance against the digital turn.

### The Social Sphere

In this split, however, art-world art stopped telling the deeper truth of how society works, and its protagonists, settling into Virgin/Chad archetypes powerless in the face of the market except when direct facilitating it, were increasingly unable to sustain any larger "cool" scene. As the perceived social currency of art-world affiliations atrophied, so too did the street-level culture around these networks, including gallery openings and the allure of art schools, which fewer and fewer students could afford, anyway. Reality itself, as the dealer quoted in the Art Basel UBS Market Report rightly noted, had become more interesting.

And yet, popular interest in theory had never been stronger! Facilitated by VPN-protected p2p filesharing, the Internet was overflowing with Foucauldian takes on the creep of surveillance culture; body politics underpinned by the thinking of Paul B. Preciado and Silvia Federici; deep adaptation through the lens of Bruno Latour; our shifting global order per Benjamin Bratton's "stacks"; and terms of labor per Nick Srnicek's "platform capitalism," among so many more. The list goes on and on—and yet, even while many artists were reading all of this too, my experience as someone who has been editing art magazines since 2008 has been that the primary discussion was taking place outside of art-world art. From the rise of whistle-blower culture and info-leaks (Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, Christopher Wiley) to questions of gender and performance, from "conceptronica" in music (Arca, Amnesia Scanner, Holly Herndon) to fashion's memetic turn (Vetements, Off-White), not to mention the growth of podcasting culture and the endless, bizarre and at times disturbing digital channels from which the likes of the Virgin/Chad meme emerged, theory seemed to be

happening foremost at the club, in music, online, through fashion, and via pop culture.

### Spring 2020

This text was commissioned prior to the global spread of COVID-19, prior to the cancellation of Art Basel Hong Kong and subsequent postponement of all fairs and auctions until at least the summer. As I write this, all museums, galleries and auction houses worldwide are currently closed to the general public. The Guggenheim New York, estimating \$10 million in losses, has furloughed ninety-two employees; the Whitney Museum of American Art has let go seventy-six, and MoMA has laid off eighty-five. The art world as we know it has been devastated, at least in the short term, by this crisis.

Yet opening my email, I am invited to view David Zwirner's "Platform: New York," where I can virtually visit twelve smaller NYC galleries. Each has been accorded an identical subpage, wherein two works by a single artist are shown. There is zero personalization beside the short text introducing the artist and program. Zwirner takes no commission and charges nothing for serving as a meta-node—but of course, in this digital arrangement, the smaller galleries' artists become associatively Zwirner's artists, the smaller gallerists' traffic now the larger gallerist's. In another email, artnet is inviting me to spend my time in quarantine "digital gallery hopping." For an industry predicated on autonomy and the power of creative acts, I am dumbfounded by the lack of freedom and limited imagination expressed.

In closing, I'm reminded of a favorite line Andrea Fraser penned for *Artforum* in 2006: "It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution," she writes. "It's a question of what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to." It's true that a bigger question right now might be who identifies with an art-centered "we" at present and, moreover, how many different art-centered "we's" there may be. I don't know the answers, but during this time when all physical art institutions are shuttered and many are out of job, it couldn't hurt to reassess what is meant by "art" in 2020. It's certainly not too late to find out.