

ART DOC 'THE PRICE OF EVERYTHING' IS SO HYPNOTIZED BY PRICE THAT IT NEGLECTS TO SAY MUCH OF VALUE ABOUT VALUE

Nathaniel Kahn's new HBO film works on the assumption that money and power is all anyone in the art world is interested in

Before I sat down to watch Nathaniel Kahn's new art world documentary for HBO, *The Price of Everything*, I said to myself, I bet this starts with a scene at an auction. I'll bet this film opens at a contemporary art sale at Christie's or Sotheby's, with a charming, well-spoken English auctioneer selling off an unquestionably blue-chip painting for an obscene sum of money. Why? Because it is the unwritten rule that all documentaries about the art world must begin at an auction. It establishes that this is going to be a film about money and power, and insinuates that money and power is all anyone in the art world is interested in, no matter how much the talking heads featured in the rest of the doc will deny is the case. Guess what? *The Price of Everything* starts with an auction. At Sotheby's, New York. As the opening credits roll, we see art handlers wheeling Francis Bacons, Roy Lichtensteins, Richard Princes, Damien Hirsts, and Andy Warhols from the viewing galleries to the block. A Charmingly Well-Spoken English Auctioneer rattles off the prices. 'We'll start at 350,000 ... 400,000 ... 500,000 ... 650,000' The soundtrack is herky-jerky atonal classical, to tell us we're in the realm of *The Avant-Garde*. '**Art and money have always gone hand-in-hand,**' declares auctioneer Simon De Pury on the V/O. '**It is very important for good art to be expensive.**' The prices start to go supernova: '13,000,000 dollars, 15,000,000 dollars ...' Now the music switches to a pompous Viennese waltz, the kind you hear used in Hollywood rom-coms when they want to signal extravagant wealth and absurdity. 'The balloon dog, sold for 52,000,000!' The Viennese waltz bounces and crescendos in time with the flow of international capital. 'A masterpiece by Jean-Michel Basquiat ...' Image of said Basquiat is flashed up on the sales-room screens. There are rapid cut shots of intense-looking staff fielding bids on the telephone banks. Computer readouts show the price in Sterling, Euros and Yen. '98,000,000 dollars ... Last chance ...' The gavel comes down. '98,000,000 dollars! Congratulations! Thank you very much!' Rapturous applause, as if something clever has been done. Title comes up: 'THE PRICE OF' in a minimal sans-serif font that signals 'high-end fashion' but also 'hedge-fund', 'EVERYTHING' in an expressive hand-drawn script, because this is a film about art and artists sign their work in cool, cursive handwriting, presumably. Then cut to a tour of Jeff Koons' studio and a crushing sense of déjà-vu.

Déjà-vu because Kahn's film appears to share the same angle on the art world that countless newspaper articles and magazine think-pieces have taken over the past decade. This is a film fascinated, like many journalists justifiably are, with the idea that **art is nothing better than an asset class for the super-rich**. It wants to know why people park their money in Basquiats and Gerhard Richters, what the mechanisms of desire are for collectors and how the art world's politicians and traders work their sales pitches. It hopes that if you shoot enough B-roll footage of people wearing wacky millinery and drinking champagne at Frieze New York art fair, you might catch a glimpse behind the curtain at a big cultural con-job in action. Structured around the run-up to New York auction week – subtitles throughout count off 'Six weeks to Fall auction', 'Four weeks to auction day' as if to build tension, though little much happens along the way – *The Price of Everything* takes its audience to the art industry's top tranche.

Kahn visits powerbrokers, big money collectors, and A-list artists. One montage sequence tells us the version of art history we are dealing with here. Mostly male, mostly white, mostly North American: Warhol, Lichtenstein, Willem De Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Di Suvero, Keith Haring, Basquiat, Richter, Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, Hirst, Prince, Koons, Takashi Murakami, Tracey Emin, Mark Bradford, Urs Fischer, Ai Weiwei, George Condo. A list so predictable that poking broken paintbrushes in my eyes would make for a more surprising visual experience than looking at this lot. We spend a lot of time at home with collector Stefan Edlis, watching him look at an Excel spreadsheet detailing his holdings and musing on the collecting game. We shadow Sotheby's Executive Vice-President Amy Cappellazzo as she prepares for auction day and uses the words 'great', 'greatest' and 'most important' rather a lot to describe the works she's selling. We get to see Condo and Marilyn Minter at work in their studios, and hear from more collectors and more auctioneers, along with a handful of art historians, notably few art dealers (brief appearances from Gavin Brown, Mary

Boone and Dennis Yares), and an obligatory turn from critic Jerry Saltz. (The other unwritten rule of all art world documentaries is that you must interview Jerry Saltz.)

A couple of key narratives run through *The Price of Everything* in addition to the auction line. One provides a thumbnail history of the postwar art market. Kahn takes the Sotheby's sale of the Robert and Ethel Scull collection in 1973 as his art market year-zero. Early collectors of abstract expressionism and pop art, the Sculls auctioned off their collection of mostly living artists' work for huge sums. In one telling archival clip shot at the sale, Robert Rauschenberg – whose 1958 work *Thaw* was bought by the Sculls for USD\$900 and sold for \$85,000 – shoves Robert Scull in the chest. 'I've been working my ass off for you to make that profit.' Scull smiles back at him. 'How about yours now your work can sell for that too? I've been working for you. We've been working for each other.' As art historian Barbara Rose explains, with the Scull auction came the realization that 'you could make money by buying low and selling high.' **The artists saw none of the money, but the sale changed the art market.**

In a second storyline, Kahn follows artist Larry Poons as he prepares for a show at Yares Art gallery in New York. For the filmmaker, Poons – trained as a classical musician before becoming a painter – represents a tale of art world capriciousness. 'They think I'm dead' says the artist, as we see him working away in his rural studio. In the 1960s, Poons was the next big thing. Then his career tanked after a change of direction in which he stopped making minimal style painting and was ostracized by his peers. A 'betrayal of the career charisma,' as he describes it. Poons comes across as affable, dedicated to his work, philosophical about his career ups and downs. Kahn gives him a cautiously redemptive story arc, including a sudden commercial interest in his minimal period work from an auction house, but ending the film with the artist's opening at Yares, surrounded by admirers.

With the exception of Koons and what dealer Jeffrey Deitch calls his 'natural American salesmanship', the artists Kahn speaks to are portrayed as leery of the art market, even though all are relatively successful. 'How do you stay sane under that white heat [of the industry]?' asks Minter. 'It's not good when this is the value of a house' remarks Richter of one of his own paintings. (Soon after this scene, we see Cappellazzo dismiss Richter's remark as 'just a social-democratic way of avoiding rich people wanting to have [his paintings].') Don't get me started.) Yet other mechanisms that build and destroy artist's careers aren't afforded enough analysis here. **Minter points out that you only get recognition as a woman 'if you're old or dead,' but this crucial observation isn't followed up.** Njideka Akunyili Crosby – along with Margaret Lee, one of only two younger artists in the film, all the others being in the mid-to late-stages of their careers – points out that the more market demand there is for her to produce work in the studio, the less time there is to live the life that she draws on for her subject matter. Lee, who makes only a brief cameo appearance at the start of the film, states: 'If we allow the marketplace to determine what's good, then there's no place for me.' 'It's really hard to be an artist,' says curator Connie Butler during a studio visit with Crosby. I would imagine a viewer unfamiliar with the art world might want to know: why?

These lines of enquiry are opened but never pursued by Kahn, who seems to prefer to dwell on the excesses of the market. The director has said that 'the idealist and hopeless romantic in me believes, now more than ever, **that there really is something in art that transcends money**, that twists free of commerce and that, at its best, points the way towards some kind of enlightenment.' Yet it's not entirely clear to me from this film whether he thinks contemporary art itself is suspect, or just the corrupting influence of big money. Perhaps it's because we don't gain much insight into what ideas drive the artists he interviews. Watching Condo and Minter at work is enjoyable, but to anyone outside the art world, you would think that painting is all that gets made these days. You would never know that performance, video, sound, installation, dance and socially-engaged work are what a large number of people in the art world talk about. The film is a 'record of the odyssey we took through the art world over the period of a couple of years,' says Kahn, one that 'evolved organically.' This 'odyssey' took him into blue-chip waters that may be entrancing for journalistic reasons but are not where the most interesting ideas evolve. Just when the film begins to turn towards more complex territory, it shies away, relying instead on a defeated-looking art historian Alexander Nemerov to stand for intellectual disillusionment with the art business, portrayed as a lone scholar who still believes there is meaning beyond commercial value. (This in

itself is a false binary.) Here Kahn's film becomes lopsided. Perhaps because it's far easier to let the new gilded age excess parody itself: the sight of collector Inga Rubenstein crying as she reminisces about buying a Hirst at Miami Art Basel, for instance, or De Pury's preposterous justifications for expensive art. Easier to shoot a window display full of Koons' god-awful Louis Vuitton 'Masters' series, layering it with the artist saying 'I have not done my best work, I want to achieve that, I want to do something spectacular,' and run with a tired Emperor's New Clothes version of the art world, than it is to grapple with contradiction and complexity.

There is plenty to critique in the art world, no question. Plenty that can be found beyond Upper East Side penthouses and auction salesrooms, in sectors that might think themselves above market vulgarities. Kahn, however, seems to have gravitated towards the most obvious area of its economy. The corner of the industry that the filmmaker portrays is so rarefied that it means little to many people themselves working in the art world. I cannot remember the last time I had a conversation with any of my peers about **Koons** – he's as relevant to the art I think about as Bono is to the music I listen to. The work in Edlis' collection leaves me cold. Like Kahn, I too think Maurizio Cattelan's gold-plated toilet, plumbed into the Guggenheim Museum lavatory system, is fatuous. **'99.99 percent of artists don't have money, it's that simple' says Saltz at one point, yet the film includes no visual representations of social status that signal anything other than wealth and professionalism.** (Poons' tumbledown country studio might be the exception but that looks idyllic to me.)

I want to see an art world documentary that visits a non-profit art space in Peckham on a wet Friday afternoon when nobody comes through the gallery. I'd like to watch a film that depicts a freelance critic juggling multiple jobs to make rent, and shows you artists creating their own art school because they can't afford the official ones. A more complete film about the art world would be one that tells us what it's like to try and start a gallery in São Paulo with the country falling down around your ears, or what it takes to run an art centre in Lagos. One that speaks to artists who had to give up their career to raise kids, who don't have friends to stay with in Berlin, who are too broke to go to Venice, documenta and Art Basel and have no clue which the cool restaurants are in London at the minute. A movie that features the artists who don't live near the major professional art centres, the ones who devote years to teaching in regional art schools, the ones who refuse to sell their work to certain collectors, and the ones who have dropped out altogether because, screw it, there's more to life than all of this. A film that speaks to dealers who had to close their galleries on the Lower East Side because they couldn't afford to run them anymore, and the smaller and mid-level gallerists who bend over backwards to support their artists. A film that follows W.A.G.E. as they lobby institutions to pay a basic minimum fee to artists for their work, that shows us a day in the life of a museum educator running workshops for teenagers, and introduces us to activists who believe that art might have purpose other than being a line on Edlis's collection spreadsheet. A documentary that dutifully catalogues the expanded field of middle-management jobs that come with capital: the art consultants, the VIP specialists, the PR firms, the fundraisers, the armies of underpaid assistants who keep the show going. I want a film that shows a private view where only three people have turned up and are standing around a plastic bucket full of beer looking awkwardly at their phones. I want a movie that asks the interns what they think. I want a film that shows the friendships and conversations that keep everyone going.

But this will likely not happen. To fund a film about the art world requires the inclusion of subjects who have name recognition beyond the specialist sphere. Which means more Koons, more Warhol, more Basquiat, Abramovi , and Cattelan, thus **reproducing a blue-chip image of the industry. The Price of Everything gives us money and power because that, today, is what we are interested in.** Excess makes for good TV, but artist-run spaces on a wet Friday afternoon in South London don't. Money and power is what also keeps HBO audiences watching comedies such as Silicon Valley, Veep and Ballers – because they satirize the tech, politics and sports worlds that we have no control over. In that respect, I can understand Kahn's motivations for making this film and if commerce is what you are interested in learning about, then Kahn will provide you with a highly polished, well-made account of it, auction house drama and all. But remember, it's not the full story.

The Price of Everything takes its title from Oscar Wilde's quip that 'nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.' Ironically, this film is so hypnotized by price that it leaves little room to say much of value about value.

Main image: Nathaniel Kahn, The Price of Everything, 2018, film still. Courtesy: HBO Documentary Films

DAN FOX

Dan Fox is a writer who lives in New York, USA. His latest book is Limbo (2018).