



**Avant-Garde or Advertising:**

**A Dialectic of Corporate Art Fair Sponsorship and Alternative Art Fair Programming**

Nate Harrison • 6.07.08

## INTRODUCTION: ART FAIRS AT THE OUTSET OF THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

Perhaps no examples more lucidly illustrate the triumph of neoliberal aesthetics and spirit than those of the global institutionalization of contemporary art and its consequent financial structuration. The economically liberal principles of deregulation, self-reliance and free enterprise, reinvigorated in the 1980s through Reagan-Thatcher policy, have colluded with modern art's core set of politically liberal principles: creative autonomy and freedom of expression, and artist as singular (read: self-determining) intelligence. Over the last few decades the implementation of this politico-economic liberalism has congealed into a set of institutional relations that greatly influence— if not overtly schedule—much of current art's production, exhibition, and reception. Described nowadays as having become “perhaps the largest legal economy in the world to be almost totally unregulated,” art is disseminated seemingly according to a neoliberal playbook.<sup>1</sup> Examples that illustrate this include the replacement of ever-diminished state funding for the arts with private sector dollars (e.g. the corporate takeover of the museum and the birth of the “blockbuster” show), the development of “magic money” art economies (e.g. the rise of the auction house and the transformation of art collecting into a multi-billion dollar, but still very risky, speculation industry), and the uncritical, celebratory embrace of multicultural expression and expansion (e.g. the now global biennial exhibition system).<sup>2</sup> Art, increasingly the province of a globe-trotting entrepreneurial elite, has never been a hotter ticket.

Art's recent financial success— any instability in the current world economy has not hampered a bullish art market that instead expands unabated— has been due in part to another, newer phenomenon: the contemporary art fair. While the fair as a model for art's reception has been in place since at least the salons of 18th century Europe, their expansion of late across the

planet is unprecedented. From New York's Armory Show to Hong Kong's International Art Fair, from Art Athina in Greece to Art Dubai, "the Middle East's first contemporary art fair,"<sup>3</sup> an economics of contemporary art is being carried out in arenas and other large scale exhibition halls around the world, resulting in a new, steroid-injected form of cultural capital.

Like the biennial model, the art fair is a globally far-reaching but temporary phenomenon (fairs usually run under a week), and is understood as more flexible and dynamic than the grounded sites of the traditional art museum or gallery.<sup>4</sup> And just as with the biennial, cosmopolitan areas around the world look to the art fair trend as a means to draw attention to themselves, in hopes of evincing a certain cultural credibility, proclaiming that they too are joining the "new world aesthetic order." Local population centers commingle with a spate of commercial art enterprises from abroad (mostly galleries but also arts related, for-profit companies), providing the impression that art, and its appreciation, know no geopolitical boundaries. At the art fair, national borders (but, curiously, not the cachet that goes along with being from "somewhere else") become meaningless. This produces a scenario where, as art historian and critic Julian Stallabrass states, "you have a German collector buying through a British dealer the work of a Chinese artist living in the US."<sup>5</sup> In Fukuyamian terms, one might understand this as signaling "the end of (art) history."<sup>6</sup>

It is then the commercial component of the art fair that is its defining characteristic, making it in this respect less like the biennial, which operates, ostensibly, for the benefit of some vaguely defined but market independent common good, and more like the art auction.<sup>7</sup> While perhaps not as naked in sheer economic determinism as the auction house, art fairs are nonetheless first and foremost about selling art, where the extent of monetary transactions establish a fair's future vitality within the larger circuit.<sup>8</sup> Market pressures become all the more

intense as new, non-western crops of monied art collectors (the beneficiaries of neoliberal economies) arrive on the scene.<sup>9</sup> Competing for eyes (and more importantly wallets), art fairs consequently work to develop symbolic marks of distinction from one another. These can take the form of a veneer that portrays a fair's activities as having significance *beyond* the purely economic— where the humanity/beauty/*je ne sais quoi*/transcendence of art is what ultimately advances the appreciation and cultivation of culture at large. Thus, in order to distinguish themselves from their competition by appearing that they are up to date with contemporary issues of representation beyond the purely economical, art fair organizers often supplement their exhibitions with “alternative” programming. For example, Art Basel includes *Art Unlimited*, a specially curated exhibit within the larger fair that is assembled outside the jurisdiction of participating gallerists.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Pulse New York promises for its 2008 event to “feature an array of cultural programs, which will be on view throughout...and will enhance the experience for collectors and the general public...[providing] a tremendous opportunity to introduce innovative programming and open up new avenues for discourse on contemporary art.”<sup>11</sup> Hardly an art fair press release is dispatched nowadays that does not contain some rhetoric about “special projects” or “roundtable discussions of critical issues.” It is this other aspect of art fair programming, hovering in an ambiguous space between the economic and the political, that will be the focus of the remainder of this essay. One art fair in particular will be analyzed: the 2007 iteration of the Contemporary Art Fair in Düsseldorf, Germany (from now on referred to as the “DC Fair”). I intend to show that the structure of power relations in place to enable alternative programming both ensures and undermines the commercial efforts of the fair at large and calls into question the role of the artist as political agent.

At this point, rather than lay out a more specific thesis and substantiate it with critical theory, I would like instead to build the case in a narrative fashion. This is a strategy I have the luxury of pursuing because I actually participated, as a “gallerist,” in the DC Fair. I am hopeful that first-hand accounts, interwoven with critical reflections on them, will over time build for the reader the same dialectical tension that I experienced during those four days in April 2007.<sup>12</sup> I will concentrate on three principle actors: the artist-gallerist, the corporate sponsor, and the audience.<sup>13</sup> It is these three actors that played out DC Fair’s alternative programming, with, as we shall see, mixed results. By the end of the fair, there seemed to have developed a disconnect between the fair’s alternative mission as set forth by the corporate sponsor and the artist-gallerist, and the realities “on the trading floor,” as set forth by the audience.

By the conclusion, I hope to have worked towards, if not answering, then at least articulating two fundamental questions: for whom was the alternative programming designed, and who, at the end of the fair, benefitted from that programming? Working through such queries necessarily requires defining of what “alternative programming” meant at the DC Fair. Let us begin this defining process first through a describing process: how I came to be involved with the 2007 DC Fair and its “Progress Imperative” programming.

## DÜSSELDORF ALTERNATIVES

In February of 2007 I received an email from Ralf at SITE Gallery, an art publication as well as artist-run exhibition space in Düsseldorf, Germany that Ralf and his partner Petra organize. SITE had learned of the Los Angeles project ESTHETICS AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) that I, along with two colleagues of mine, had been coordinating, and

wanted to know if ESL would be interested in participating in the forthcoming April 2007 DC Fair, the first of its kind in the region.<sup>14</sup> The DC Fair's organizing board had charged SITE with the task of assembling a small group of specifically *artist-run* galleries (SITE included) who could round out the overall line-up of established commercial spaces invited to the fair. These ten spaces would be made distinct from other galleries at the fair by being promoted under the label "Progress Imperative." SITE was inviting artist-run spaces considered "outstanding because of their experimental, critical or original approaches towards structures and strategies of presentation and distribution of art."<sup>15</sup> Yet after reading the proposal SITE had prepared, it was rather apparent that while the ten artist-run spaces weren't being asked to operate as explicitly as their commercial "older brothers," there was an implied logic already in place. It was a logic suggesting that any artist or group of artists— whatever their degree of "experimentation"— intending to manage their own exhibition space, would ultimately do so for commercial purposes. A default condition therefore established: it was a given that art's dissemination occurred primarily through commercial channels, regardless of intent. Moreover, access to those channels (i.e. being part of the art fair) was a "pay to play" proposition (galleries pay hefty sums to participate, and the invited "Progress Imperative" group were no exception). It is true that SITE, realizing that fledgling artist-run spaces don't necessarily have the organizational capital typical of a more seasoned gallery, offered some ideas to help ameliorate costs. Already they had successfully negotiated with the fair organizers for the reduction of registration fees, down from about \$7000 USD to the bargain basement price of \$3500 USD. In addition, SITE proposed raising money for travel expenses by having all Progress Imperative participants submit an original two-dimensional work by "one of their artists" for inclusion in a portfolio of prints, editioned in thirty-six and for sale at the fair.<sup>16</sup> In theory this would help defray everyone's costs,

yet I felt that by agreeing to such terms, precisely those “critical or original approaches towards structures and strategies of presentation and distribution of art” mentioned at the outset of the proposal would be left unchallenged.<sup>17</sup>

Economics aside, the proposal’s approach assumed some other conditions of production: it was also supposed that artist-run spaces, like their more established counterparts, “represent” artists (if even themselves), nurturing and promoting them over the long term presumably for mutual benefit (along with money, galleries accumulate prestige for themselves and their artists when they successfully represent them). Moreover, it was assumed that artists, regardless of their medium or preferred working method, are interested in and capable of producing two-dimensional work that adequately conveys their practice. From this of course a corollary assumption is also revealed: that those artists selected to be included in Progress Imperative make work that can be easily transported and likewise readily fit into a portfolio of other similarly-sized work. But what if “critical or original approaches towards structures and strategies of presentation and distribution of art” means making work that falls outside of a portfolio, or for that matter, object-oriented, convention? All of this made me wonder: how serious was SITE about highlighting presentation and distribution issues, towards a reevaluation of modes of artistic representation and dissemination? Could the DC Fair really operate as a self-critical site by granting what I felt was a rather restrictive license to a group of “alternative” artist-run spaces?

It turns out SITE was quite committed to bringing in artist-run projects that might complicate the logic of the DC Fair. Initially I responded to them that while we certainly appreciated the invitation, SITE was asking something of ESL that it simply could not produce, for both ideological and financial reasons. ESL does not represent artists in the traditional sense.

Its programming depends on a spontaneous and flexible approach to art production. In homage to the legacy of conceptual art in the most basic sense, ideas are privileged over discreet art objects, and thus ESL considers those artists invited to produce projects as peers in an ongoing conversation, not as subjectivities to be groomed for future commercial production. Furthermore, artist projects made for ESL are of an intentionally temporary and/or disposable nature, lasting for only twenty-four hours. It seemed the parameters within which artist-run spaces were being asked to participate in the DC Fair, couched in the rhetoric of progress, conflicted with the position in which ESL had sought to place itself politically since its inception.<sup>18</sup> Finally, since ESL has never conceived of its projects as money makers and is not interested in the “business” conventions of the gallery system, it has no reserve funds available to interact with that system. Spending more than a few hundred dollars on an art project or related endeavor would be a lavish use of otherwise sparse resources, especially when other creative solutions exist.

With these considerations in mind and after discussing it with my colleagues, it was decided that ESL could not reasonably see itself participating in the DC Fair without their being a paradigm shift in the way “alternative” projects were to be imagined there. I wrote to Ralf stating that given the circumstances, ESL would not attend. Yet he replied enthusiastically, stating that registration fees could be waived if ESL was able to pay its own travel fare to Germany. It seemed SITE was willing to support ESL despite the real possibility of it being a money-losing endeavor for both parties. Perhaps Ralf’s desire really mirrored my own; I did wonder how a group like ESL might operate in such a blatantly commercial fair context. From that perspective I was certain that participating in the fair would fail miserably (after all, ESL had nothing to sell). Nonetheless I wanted to see for myself how the logic of the art fair operated, and how ESL could, if at all, fit into it. ESL ended up agreeing to participate on the condition that the

registration fees be waived; it was decided by my colleagues and I that I go alone, given ESL's very small budget. It was also decided that I would present a trio of documentary videos that critically engage present day social issues: Kelvin Park's *Invitation to a Peaceful City* (2005), which lays bare the strained relations between the inhabitants of Pyong-taek, a South Korean village, and the United States Air Force, which has commandeered it; Sergio De La Torre and Vicky Funari's *Maquilapolis* (2006), which illuminates the realities of women sweatshop workers along the Tijuana/San Diego border; Brian Springer's *The Disappointment* (2006), a video essay interweaving a variety of threads— American colonialism both within and outside US borders, Cold War historiography, mysticism, and the lingering effects of war trauma.<sup>19</sup> I felt presenting these three works (“non-object” projects, specifically not for sale that would be screened free of charge throughout the duration of the fair) would adequately convey ESL's purpose. I wasn't sure what to expect from other Progress Imperative participants, but I felt it would be a disservice to the concept of “progress,” whatever that meant, if ESL subscribed to the DC Fair's implicit suggestion of emulating commercial gallery practices.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROGRESS IN THE ARTS

What did it mean for a project like ESL to participate, along with other artist-run spaces, in the DC Fair under the header “Progress Imperative”? The label implies a state of affairs in disarray, as if the fair finds itself “off-course” and in need of guidance by fresh perspectives from emerging artistic practices. But a seemingly needed progression towards what? Did it mean progress in a conventional formalist-aesthetic sense, akin to the historical modernist avant-garde, with its succession of “isms”? Or did progress connote a more activist stance, one where artists

are enjoined to design not just new forms of expression but also new strategies of engagement with the world, in order to counteract a perceived hyper-administered, post-industrial condition permeated with the logic of instrumental reason and neoliberal market determinism?<sup>20</sup> Or perhaps progress meant rejuvenating in a general sense the core Western humanist values instilled since the Enlightenment— yet how to define those? “Progress Imperative” then seems a vague slogan, yet in its vagueness casts a sense of moral urgency onto a concept that could mean many things to many people; it is a blanket but strong call to action. In order to determine what sort of entity, over and above the artist-run spaces participating in the DC Fair, might want to propagate such a slogan, we should first look briefly at the ways notions of progress have been carried out historically within the fair context, and by whom.

The art fair has been a site in the contest of cultural meaning and progress since the invention of the large-scale fair model itself in 19th century Europe. For example, we can look to post-revolutionary France, where the term *avant-garde* was first applied to artistic endeavors in its more literal military sense, to see how its definition fit into the burgeoning national fair phenomenon of the time. The avant-garde demanded that the arts “serve the general good and the political aims of the Republic after their liberation.”<sup>21</sup> As the painter Jaques-Louis David stated, “Canvas, marble and bronze will be rivaling each other in their urge to show posterity the unflinching courage of our Republican Phalanxes...We have conquered our foes in arms, and will do so again in the arts.”<sup>21</sup> This national pride sweeping France culminated in the “Exposition de l’industrie” of 1806, where exhibitors of fine art were included in a French trade fair for the first time in order to promote French cultural superiority.<sup>23</sup> We might conceptualize art and “imperative progress” in this case as linked in a way meant to promote the will of a newly created, democratic state. It was crucial that art be used as a tool to express the continuation of

revolutionary courage against centuries of monarchical rule and the modes of art production it supported (and that in turn supported it).

Looking to the United States in 1913 and the first ever “Armory Show” (also known as the International Exhibition of Modern Art) held at New York City's 69th Regiment Armory, we find another example of the artist acting as progressive agent. While not as revolutionary in the larger political sense as the emerging cadre of artists following the French Revolution, the Armory show's organizers nevertheless caused a paradigm shift in the way art was received and legitimized within the United States. Running up against what they felt were elitist and obsolete annual shows put on by the National Academy of Design— an organization ironically modeled after the very academy that revolutionary France helped spawn— a young group of artists took it upon themselves to organize an exhibition of their own work. They felt an exhibit that included modern European and American art would reflect emerging sensibilities at the outset of the twentieth century, in contrast to the parochial tastes that had dominated the academy for so long. Though the Armory Show ended up being less a financial success for American artists than it was for their European counterparts (all of Marcel Duchamp's paintings, including *Nude Descending a Staircase*, sold), it nonetheless had the longer lasting effect of creating a hitherto non-existent market for contemporary art in the United States. Control over the dissemination of art was wrestled away from the academy system and put into the hands of a new group of collectors and dealers, people who purchased work at the Armory and several of whom subsequently started their own commercial art galleries. The model of private galleries as primary sources of contemporary art and taste making continues in the present, and are the same that now fill the exhibition spaces of art fairs worldwide.<sup>24</sup>

These examples— artists in post-revolution France and in the 1913 Armory Show, help to historicize “imperative progress” in relation to artistic practice in the present. Despite their different historical circumstances, they share a fundamental characteristic: mandates of change given to artists, whether in the name of a liberated people or in the name of creative and economic autonomy, are prescribed by the artists themselves. Being pro-active and at the forefront of cultural change is internalized in the very identity of the modern artist. The mandate is not handed down to by a higher authority (i.e. a national leader, a senior academic). Generally speaking, it is precisely the rejection of the status quo as established by an existing dominant power structure that has defined the modern artistic sensibility.

So while the idea of SITE, an artist-run space, asking other artist-run spaces to participate in an art fair towards performing some progressive gesture in an avant-garde tradition might have looked good on paper, it should be remembered that SITE was itself asked to do so by the fair’s organizers and financial backers, which included, as I discovered upon my initial visit to the Düsseldorf exhibition hall, the automobile manufacturer Audi. It was Audi specifically who was sponsoring the “Progress Imperative” portion of the fair. What did it mean for a corporate entity such as Audi to align itself with this phrase? According to author Chin-Tao Wu, corporate affiliation with contemporary art is an obvious and practical strategy. “The mythical cult of artistic personality,” she states, “and the strong association between avant-garde art and innovation with the paradigms of modernism have provided the business world with a valuable tool for the projection of an image of itself as a liberal and progressive force.”<sup>25</sup> Corporation intervention in the arts is good for business, especially when done under the banner of imperative progress, because it makes a natural link between the business’ activities and innovation. It bestows upon business a certain cultural capital that it hopes to later “cash in” when consumers

show up to buy new goods and services (Audi cars in this case), correlating them with cultural appreciation, celebration, and preservation. The sponsored event– the DC Fair– becomes a site for sales promotion, advertising not only Audi cars, but also Audi’s “enlightened” corporate image.<sup>26</sup>

There is an additional benefit to corporate sponsorship of the arts. Supporting art events gives corporations the opportunity to burnish what might be an otherwise less than stellar public image. This can be seen to a great extent in the sponsorship of art exhibits by tobacco and oil companies, companies whose ethics often come under attack by activist and other socially and environmentally conscious groups.<sup>27</sup> And while the business endeavors of an auto manufacturer like Audi might not seem quite as problematic as say, Exxon, they are inextricably linked. I hope the account that follows next will elucidate the peculiar tension produced when a corporate-sponsored platform for social critique allows for criticism of the system within which the sponsor itself participates, demonstrating paradoxically the sponsor’s business and humanitarian acumen, regardless of any actual progressive change brought about by such sponsorship.

#### AND THE WINNER IS...

I got to the DC Fair exhibition hall just in time to set up (I didn’t have to do much more than mount a video projector and DVD player to opposing walls and rent two chairs from the fair’s installation team) before the opening night festivities began. Through the course of the evening, thousands of people thronged the fair, from the leisurely public to avid art collectors. Several people stopped by the ESL booth, which was playing *Maquilapolis* on loop, watching for a few minutes before moving on. The three videos I had brought with me each lasted an hour or

more, which made watching them in their entirety difficult.<sup>28</sup> Overall people were politely curious about *Maquilapolis*, but not many asked me questions about it or ESL in general, and I suspected many did not know what exactly I was doing there (perhaps myself included). At the end of the night, Ralf from SITE casually informed me that early the next morning, before the fair opened to the general public, a team of curators from local Düsseldorf arts institutions as well as representatives from Audi would be making the rounds of the Progress Imperative booths, to judge who would win Audi's *Progress Imperative Art Award*, a prize worth 5,000 Euros. This was the first time I had heard not only the name Audi mentioned as a fair sponsor but also any prize money.

Learning that Audi was part of the Progress Imperative initiative reawakened suspicion that my involvement, along with the other young galleries there, might be part of a publicity stunt intended primarily to bolster Audi's connection with cultural programming and thus its own image. According to Chin-Tao Wu, awarding prizes has been a more recent phenomenon in the larger strategy of corporate art sponsorship. In sponsoring blockbuster-scale museum exhibitions, corporations attach themselves to the cultivation of culture, but with art awards, they attach themselves more directly to the mechanics of creativity itself. Getting closer to the decision making processes of the cultural producer– the artist– by enabling him/her, further conflates business practice with art practice.

When actually choosing award winners, corporations often rely on the expertise of outside art professionals (in this case SITE as well as curators from the local area) who render value judgements in the interest of creating a publicly rendered hierarchy of taste. This aligns corporate interests with those of a discerning public, further situating corporations at the very center of creative excellence.<sup>29</sup> It turns out I would meet just such an art professional very soon.

I arrived the following morning to find a gentleman sitting down at the ESL booth, watching *Maquilapolis*. He did not identify himself, and other than asking me my name and where I was from, he remained silent. He stayed for quite a long time and, mistaking him for part of the general fair public, thanked him for taking so much time with the video. Only a little later, when he returned with a couple of other people in business attire to further analyze *Maquilapolis*, did I realize he might be part of Audi's prize jury. This suspicion was confirmed an hour or so later when, much to my surprise, I was greeted by an entourage that included the DC Fair director, a slew of curators, representatives from Audi, and a press team. They informed me that ESL was being awarded the Audi Art Prize in recognition of working with more critical, socially engaged, "progressive" content that still retained "pleasurable form."<sup>30</sup> I was handed a bouquet of flowers and a cliché oversized check in the amount of 5,000 Euros. I was then whisked away to the center of the exhibition hall for photos with more Audi representatives, and was asked to make a statement for the press. I stated that I was very surprised by what had just happened, and that I was sincerely thankful for the prize as it would help fund future ESL projects back in Los Angeles.

For the remainder of my time in Düsseldorf Audi treated me like royalty. I was chauffeured to and from the fair by the their shuttle service that was otherwise reserved for transporting high-end collectors and other VIPs. I was invited to a special dinner for Audi executives and shareholders being held in conjunction with another art event Audi was sponsoring, a Picasso exhibit at the local Kunstverein. Of course I was invited to the opening of that show, and acquiesced to giving an impromptu speech before a group of about 150 executives there. During my speech I asked that the audience recognize the work of the three artists whose

videos ESL had been screening, as well as the more general need of continuing to keep “alternative” art practices within the discourse of contemporary art fairs.

And yet, after returning to the fair grounds, I wondered if I meant what I had said. On one level I was quite thrilled to have won the Audi art prize; on another level, I felt a little guilty that I had accepted it. There were plenty of booths around me at the fair, both fledgling and established gallery alike, full of people who were working hard to make sure their efforts were successful, at least financially speaking. Out of the more than eighty galleries exhibiting, ESL was one of only two or three who were not at the fair to sell art work. It was very clear the DC Fair was intended as a site for commerce (even for the other Progress Imperative spaces, including SITE, who were operating as conventional galleries), and it seemed a little strange that an award should be given in that context to one of the few groups not engaged in such activity. It was as if the award was symbolically applauding the achievement of revealing something that in fact had never been hidden. I had to believe that many if not most participants at the fair understood the need, time and place for various approaches to art, and I don't think anyone, in seeing the ESL booth, was surprised to learn that there were contemporary art practices that operated outside of the realms of fair sales. In this sense I felt a little like a token social activist who, by being put on a pedestal by Audi, was made to appear somewhat quaint.

While quite pleased with the award money and eager to relay the news to my colleagues, I nevertheless felt “contained” by it; ESL had been framed (even literally by the booth) as embodying “imperative progress.” Yet once contained, I felt ESL was rendered innocuous. It was just one neatly packaged art project in a sea of others, and in a sense ESL *was* acting a commercial manner, as Audi had just “bought” it. In my mind this essentially ended the conversation about what “Progress Imperative” meant, while the rest of the fair continued about

its activities, conducting business as usual. In the meantime, I was already receiving, via email that I could check at the Fair lounge, press releases about Audi's sponsorship of the DC Fair, which included photos and text of me, hobnobbing it with a Düsseldorfian elite. Heading back to the U.S. after the DC Fair, I wondered: in accepting the Audi Art Award (and becoming several thousand Euros richer), had I allowed ESL to become an advertisement for Audi?

To pose such a question is perhaps a little unfair. Reaching a satisfactory answer would require a much more thorough analysis, beyond the particularities of one art fair, of the politics of local arts support by both public and private sources. Düsseldorf is part of the North Rhine-Westphalia state, considered to be an economic hub of Germany; perhaps art events sponsored by local industry are thought of in terms of eliciting a regional, if not national, pride and as something not at all of which to be suspicious.<sup>31</sup> And then there is the added dimension of the German approach to cultural production and cultivation as a whole, an approach perceived by many outside its borders (especially American artists like me) to be preferable because of its support of the arts through extensive state funding. Perhaps because of state arts funding in Germany, there isn't as much antagonism towards corporate arts intervention; it does not represent uberprivatized, neoliberal control and power nearly to the extent that it does in the left-leaning art discourses of the United States.<sup>32</sup> It should be remembered that ESL's original context is Los Angeles, the epicenter of global corporate entertainment. Perhaps transposing my own U.S.-centric value system onto the DC Fair was not entirely applicable. Yet it should also be remembered that Audi is a corporation in today's world, which is to say it's transnational; its primary objective is to spread brand awareness irrespective of geography boundaries and cultural particularities. It is no secret that Audi is a significant player in the propagation of global capitalism, and its support of art is one strategy the helps ensure the company remains not only

relevant but also “ahead of the curve,” a must in the competitive atmosphere of the world marketplace.

## CONCLUSION: HEGEMONY WITH AN UNEXPECTED TWIST

Analyzed through a Gramscian lens, Audi’s involvement with the DC Art Fair seems consistent with the preservation of the status quo (elite power framing the terms of cultural production) precisely through the inclusion of (somewhat muted) subaltern creative voices in the name of “progress.” This “flexibility” of the boundaries between dominant/subordinate modes of expression allows the hegemonic bloc to appear accommodating, further validating it as the legitimate source of authority and perpetuating the existing hierarchical structure of social relations. Once framed, subaltern voices may shout as loud as they like; they pose little threat to the larger order— their mode of dissent has been defined for them.<sup>33</sup>

Theory crystallized into reality during a particular moment at the ESL booth, just after I had received the Audi prize. I was watching *Maquilapolis* and engaging in a casual conversation with some of the representatives from Audi about it when one of its more troubling scenes began. In it Lourdes, one of the maquiladora workers featured in the video, takes the viewer on a tour through the conditions of her backyard and surrounding Tijuana neighborhood. She points out for the camera lead and other toxics substances seeping into the ground from a gigantic pile of literally thousands of old car batteries, left to decay by a defunct metal harvesting company abandoned by its owner, Jose Kahn; he had fled to San Diego to avoid being brought up on charges of environmental negligence. And so there I was, being congratulated (and handsomely rewarded) by a group of auto executives for screening a video that was exposing the harmful

effects of an industrial process to which they, if even indirectly, were contributing. Even more, the recognition given to ESL (and by extension, the recognition given to the plight of maquiladoras) was providing Audi publicity that it could use in its efforts to present itself as a progressive company, increasing its appeal, with the goal of translating that appeal into increased auto production, which in turn produces more batteries, more potential environmental problems, and so on. I found myself mired in an Adornoesque negative dialectic that stayed with me throughout my time in Germany.

But what else should I have expected from this encounter with corporate art sponsorship? The cunning nature of marketing strategists is well known, and criticism of corporate ethics well established. In this sense analyzing the specifics of my experience with Audi at the DC Fair doesn't exactly produce any major revelations. Yet there is another aspect to the dynamics of hegemony that might prove more fruitful: the contested boundaries between dominant and subaltern expression are always in a state of negotiation and flux, which means that over time the characteristics that define the hegemonic bloc can be changed, replaced in a piecemeal fashion. This is not to say that hegemony disappears, only that hegemony doesn't have a static identity—its makeup is neither what the hegemonic bloc itself nor subaltern groups imagine it to be, but a mixture, however unbalanced, between them.

This fluid state of affairs can allow for unexpected possibilities. For while I may have aided Audi in its quest to promulgate an enhanced, culturally progressive image, what that does for them in the future is difficult to measure. Meanwhile, the fact is ESL participated in the DC Art Fair free of charge, sold nothing, and walked away from it 5,000 Euros richer, which is more than can be said for several of the commercial galleries who participated. During the fair it was mentioned to me in passing by various gallerists that few were selling enough to have made the

trip to Düsseldorf worth it. Collectors were looking, but they weren't really buying, at least as much as was predicted. I can't help but wonder if, because of the inclusion of the Progress Imperative spaces, there wasn't enough emphasis placed on soliciting other, blue-chip galleries and artists to participate in order to help do what fairs do best, which is sell art.

In the final analysis, it is difficult to say for whom the Progress Imperative portion of the DC Fair was designed. Perhaps the fair's organizers, in trying to distinguish it from other fairs by equating it with young artistic energy, simply misjudged their audience's more conservative tastes. Or perhaps two fairs in the same region— the Cologne Art Fair is relatively close by and is more established— is one too many.

A somewhat more cynical conclusion might be that "Progress Imperative" was designed in collusion with Audi itself, for the company would stand to benefit, if only at first symbolically, from alternative programming that aligns it with the spirit of innovation. I hesitate to settle on such a determination. What I can settle on is the determination that the Progress Imperative programming was beneficial for ESL; because of Audi's Art Award, ESL has been able to continue its efforts in Los Angeles, furthering critical engagement with the institutionalization of art there. However, I don't think that the programming really gave a boost to either the rest of the Progress Imperative group, or any of the established galleries. Ultimately I believe the actual execution of "Progress Imperative" backfired; it was never conceived as anything other than "inside the box" thinking ripe for corporate exploitation, yet in forming part of the fair's "mark of distinction," it drew attention away from the commerce focus on which fairs depend. The final indicator that the DC Fair had positioned itself problematically through the Progress Imperative initiative came just weeks before its April 2008 iteration was set open; a press release was sent out saying the DC Fair would be cancelled due to lack of gallery interest. Perhaps its demise is a

harbinger for things to come— perhaps the field of art fairs is now supersaturated, and it's finally beginning to show.

Prize money aside, overall I am glad that my colleagues and I decided to have ESL participate in the 2007 DC Fair. It allowed me an unexpected, first hand experience with the realities of the fair model of art distribution as well as the politics of corporate art sponsorship. A bittersweet feeling about winning the Audi Art prize stayed with me for some time afterwards, but in retrospect, I think ESL's mere presence at the fair was a political gesture in and of itself, regardless of any corporate sponsor or art award. Injecting ESL into that environment produced an unintended rupture, albeit small, within an increasingly transparent neoliberal logic of art production and dissemination, demonstrating that those strategies meant to strengthen the logic sometimes produce its opposite.

## Notes

1. See “Is the art market heading for a fall?”, Times Online, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/visual\\_arts/article3620880.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article3620880.ece) (accessed March 30, 2008).
2. On corporate takeover, see Chin-Tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*, (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 122- 271. On speculation economies see Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism; First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” in *Public Culture* (2000, 12:2): 291-343. On Biennials, see Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated : The Story of Contemporary Art*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
3. See “Art Projects at Art Dubai” electronic newsletter from e-flux, February 19, 2008. For more information see <http://www.e-flux.com/>. The numbers of art fairs today seems to be growing exponentially; here is a list, not at all exhaustive: PINTA, the Latin American Fair for Modern and Contemporary Art (New York), Frieze Art Fair (London), Volta, (multiple cities), Art Athina (Athens), Artissima (Turin), NEXT (Chicago), Pulse (multiple cities), ArtBrussels (Brussels), Art HK (Hong Kong), ARCO (Madrid), ART FAIR TOKYO (Tokyo), ART COLOGNE (Cologne), MiArt (Milan), Art Dubai (Dubai), SCOPE (multiple cities), Art Basel (Basel), Bridge Art Fair (multiple cities), Amrory Show (New York), NADA (multiple cities), ART TLV (Tel Aviv).
4. While it is true that some biennials actually take place in museums (for example the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art), it is also true that as the number of biennials increases globally, so too do they take on new modes of presentation. This is especially the case in cities that do not have a conventional Western institutional infrastructure, where part of the biennial’s allure is how it “fits” within the host region’s local geography. An example of this would be the Venice Biennale, where art is installed throughout the nooks and crannies of the city’s maze of streets. Art Fairs over the past few years have taken on a similar “organic” structure, if perhaps for a different reason. It should be noted that art fairs are exclusive endeavors– not just any gallery can participate in any fair. The social realities of gallery prestige have dictated a certain “taste” hierarchy within the fair circuit, such that galleries denied by organizers from one, more reputable fair instead participate in

other, lesser known but nearby fairs, which are set up to take advantage of the hype surrounding the better known exhibition. This has resulted in the rhizome-like tendency of fairs-within-fairs, which sprawl not according to any preconceived exhibition plan but according to the needs of a growing collector base, one that might potentially be interested in art “on the margins.” Art Basel in Miami is one example, having been a singular fair that now finds itself flanked by more than a dozen other “satellite” fairs and exhibitions.

5. 5. Stalabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 5.

6. 6. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Bard, 1998).

7. Mention something here about auctions selling more old masters and Impressionist work, and that while contemporary is increasingly appearing because of the shrinking supply of old masters, it is at the fair where the most “cutting” edge art is bought and sold. See the book on Auction and art collecting for more info.

8. As we shall see towards the end of the essay, it was, at least in the case of the Düsseldorf Contemporary Art Fair, not the “quality” of art work that mattered, but whether or not it successfully sold that determined the fair’s fate.

9. There are a plethora of articles from the past several years that directly tie post-Cold War economies and their subsequent nouveau riche to the art of, well, art collecting. See for example Peter Schjeldahl, “Temptations of the Art Fair,” in *The New Yorker*, December 18, 2006.

10. This is to say, artists asked to participate in *Art Unlimited* are done so through the curatorial team of Art Basel itself, and not through a gallery’s reputation and/or ability to bare the financial burden of installing a booth at the central Art Basel exhibition floor.

11. See “Pulse New York at Pier 40,” electronic newsletter from e-flux, March 25, 2008. For more information see <http://www.e-flux.com/>.

12. I would like make clear that while I believe my first-hand accounts of the DC Fair will help articulate the strange and multi-faceted nature of art fairs in general, I did not go to the art fair in order to study it, in the anthropological sense. As such my descriptions may not follow any conventional “field-study” protocol, yet I hope they are compelling nonetheless, conveying to the reader my mixed feelings about my involvement. This

essay is in part a “coming to terms” with what I saw, heard and came to realize about art world power dynamics, after the fact.

13. There are certainly other players involved in the art fair equation, but I want to concentrate on these three in the context of the DC Fair in particular because I want to show how the first two— the corporate entity and the artist-gallerist— make possible the conditions for alternative art fair programming, while the third— the audience— determines the success of such programming and of the art fair overall.

14. ESL has been in existence in March 2004. While providing an historical overview of ESL is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that it is an artist-run project designed on a model different from the typical, commercial gallery and its mechanisms for art’s dissemination. This is how ESL describes itself: “ESL | ESTHETICS AS A SECOND LANGUAGE is a debate interval between academia, art institutions and individuals, coordinated by artists Nate Harrison, Hugo Hopping and Mario Garcia Torres. ESL is an outfit that aims to provide the stage to publicly discuss social matter in the art arena, envisioning art and thinking as potential agents for social intervention. It is a movable concept that migrates from physical to virtual space and hopes to encounter other significant areas of interaction. ESL is not a democratic nor an authoritarian organization but a flexible structure where everyone that participates becomes part of its development and expansion. ESL is publicly known for a one-night event series hosted in east Los Angeles.” For more information see <http://www.eslprojects.org>.

15. Electronic correspondence between Ralf Brög and Petra Rinck (SITE) and myself, November 7, 2006.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. ESL had designed its exhibition strategy specifically in response to Los Angeles’ commercial art climate and overall art institutional apparatus.

19. Many thanks to the artists for allowing ESL to screen their works.

20. On the modernist avant-garde see Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985). On instrumental reason and a critique of culture industry,

see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [Philosophische Fragmente.] (New York: Continuum, 2002). On the neoliberal condition see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, England; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

21. Oskar Batschmann, *The Artist in the Modern World: The Conflict between Market and Self-Expression* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1997), 72.

22. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 72.

23. *Ibid.* 73.

24. On the 1913 Armory show, see Shelley Staples, “Marketing Modern Art in America: From the Armory Show to the Department Store,” <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~museum/armory/marketing.html> (accessed 5/31/08). See also Peter Watson, *From Manet to Manhattan: The Rise of the Modern Art Market* (New York: Random House, 1992).

25. Wu, *Privatising Culture*, 125.

26. *Ibid.*, 132.

27. *Ibid.*, 129.

28. This fact was not lost on me; I actually hoped bringing longer videos would disrupt what I felt would be the pace of the fair audience, who tend to browse a booth’s “wares” for a couple of minutes and then move on.

29. Wu, *Privatising Culture*, 161.

30. The jury especially liked the cinematography in *Maquilapolis*, and the way the video visually presented its women subjects: stylized physical gestures, repetition, time lapse photography, juxtaposition between professional and amateur photography, and so on. It was important for the judges that the work was more than a didactic social documentary. Many thanks go to Vicky and Sergio for allowing me to screen their video.

31. On general information on North Rhine-Westphalia, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North\\_Rhine-Westphalia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Rhine-Westphalia) (accessed June 1, 2008).

32. In the United States antagonism in contemporary art towards its corporatization is old enough to have formed not only a history but also a quasi-canon; for example the artist Hans Haacke has spent a good portion of his art career specifically critiquing the relationships between art and big business.

33. On hegemony see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 2005).

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