Selected Private Collections and Contexts

Coordinated by Lynn Glomwell

University Art Museum

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State University of New York at Binghamton
ART COLLECTED: Private, Corporate and Museum Contexts

The art collection, both as a concept and as a physical presentation, is the subject of the articles in this exhibition. Attacks on the modernist myth of art's autonomy and the inaccessibility of art existing in a social context, are truths of the 1980s. These artists stress several themes related to the context of art collections: the insular nature of museums, corporate and private collections, conflicts inherent in mixing art and money, and the formal, ideosyncratic nature of private collections. In the end, this exhibit heightens our sensitivity to these issues and to the context of art collections around us. In their series Index: Incident in a Museum, Art and Language present the museum as an institution in which art is collected and hermetically sealed in a clean, unhabitable cube of space, as in the example of MoMA from 1966, which is based on the design of the Whitney Museum. The corporate setting is preserved as equally antiseptic in Allen McCollum's series of Surrogates, collections of paintings in which any one can be substituted for another because they are all equally empty. These inert objects parody the mystical aura of their minimalist predecessors.

In Global Marketing, Hans Haacke criticizes the corporate sponsorship of art for promotional purposes, by bluntly writing the name "Saotho & Saothi" across the paintings. According to Haacke, corporate ownership is the main content of these paintings, which are otherwise barely distinguishable. The line between corporation and museum is often blurred in such corporate collections. Saothi & Saothi has an exhibition space, collection, and acquisition budget that rival most modern museums. Data about the South African affiliates of Saothi & Saothi is included in the paintings, to stress the corporation's involvement in an apartheid society, despite its cultural gloss. The interesting issue raised by Art and Language and Hans Haacke is whether or not corporations and museums have a financial interest in art. Obviously they do. As Donald Kuspit has said, Art and Language's work implies that art and art institutions are both necessary and dangerous to the autonomy of art. The challenge is to determine how to best function in this financial arena—for itself, and for the enormous corporate audience it would not otherwise address.

The eclectic, real-life context of the private collection is brought to us in Louise Lawler's Living Room Canvas, competing for our attention are Steve Wunder on the TV, a Roy Lichtenstein Pop Art lamp, an African mask, and, looming behind it all, a matching knee-high of early 20th century Abstract art, Robert Delaunay's Simultaneous Disc of 1912. Lawler underscores the importance of this grouping by her subtitle, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, who are the collectors and chief contributors to the context in which this work is seen.

A premise of this exhibit is that private, corporate, and museum contexts have a powerful influence on one's perception of the art object and, indeed, on the nature of the work itself. This is true to a point. The benefit of this exhibit is that it increases our awareness of context; however, it also encourages us to seek art which is unable to fade into its setting as wall decoration because it communicates something important about the human condition. It is impossible for such art to exist in private, corporate, and museum contexts. Indeed, there is no surrogate for Delaunay's Disc. Is passionate art necessary only desired bloodlessly, stamped with the insignia of its owner, and made into a mass commodity by these contexts? I think not. No more than playing a Steve Wunder tune on the elevator turns it into background music.

by Lynn Gamwell

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Works in the Exhibition

**Hans Haacke**
Global Marketing (On the Wall), 1987, silkscreen on metal, 4 pieces, 48" x 48" each. Courtesy of the New Museum, New York.

**Louise Lawler**


Legs Camondo (Jeu de Paume), 1982, silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.


**Allan McCollum**