

De Appel's new course
in art dealing

Jason Farago

Amsterdam has a centuries-long history of mercantile exchange and commercial speculation, so perhaps it's fitting that it is now home to an art-world first: a degree in art dealing. The De Appel Arts Centre, which hosts one of Europe's more respected curatorial training courses, introduced in 2012 what it calls 'the first practical training programme for art professionals in the commercial segment of the art world'. As recently as a decade ago, such a programme would have sounded ridiculous. But with the division between the commercial and non-profit spheres thinner than ever – witness Jeffrey Deitch closing his gallery to lead Los Angeles's MOCA, or Eric Shiner, director of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, organizing a section of the Armory Show – an institution like De Appel may be better equipped to instruct young dealers than anyone realizes.

De Appel's programme only nominally takes place in Amsterdam: the participants have remained in their hometowns for much of the year, coordinating their studies with professors via email and Skype. When the group does assemble, for a week here and there, they meet at various way-stations of the art-world circuit. The 2012–13 *parcours* has included: Rotterdam, Brussels, London, New York, Berlin, Warsaw, Hong Kong and Basel. That's a lot of time on the road and, while a few of these study weeks take place around actual exhibitions, the programme mostly revolves around art fairs. With fairs now constituting such a large proportion of dealers' sales, any young art professionals looking to make their names have no choice but to hang out in their VIP lounges. I just hope that the students have a cache of frequent-flyer miles: while De Appel covers hotels and some incidentals, the cost of airfares falls on the students themselves.

Can you teach someone how to sell? And, if so, is that a humanistic enterprise or a professional one? I was glad to discover, in a discussion with the programme's coordinator, that the students learn practical knowledge such as how to write a budget and how to plan a fair installation – skills without which many young galleries founder. The students' final project is the creation of a selling exhibition for Liste, the young galleries' fair in Basel.

De Appel is putting up the cash for the booth (in 2013, Liste's least expensive spot cost £4,700) and, once they've paid this back, any profits the students make are theirs to keep. However, De Appel is one of the Netherlands' oldest non-profits, and much of the gallerist programme's activity is troublingly dressed up in the same rhetoric as the curatorial one, as if the difference between them was simply a matter of emphasis.

It's important to note that the De Appel programme has appealed, this first year, mostly to students who are already working as dealers. The majority of the students are over 30 years old, and many already have jobs with respectable small galleries. That, at least, goes against the prevailing tendency in non-academic degree programmes, which use the veneer of education as a tease for professional placement. Curatorial studies has spread worldwide, luring students with promises of museum jobs or access to the Obrist & Co., biennial-via-FedEx curatorial jetset. Sotheby's and Christie's both have educational programmes, too, offering degrees in 'art business' with undemanding admissions requirements (tuition: around £24,000). 'Art education is a massive good business,' the former director of Sotheby's Institute of Art told *The New York Times* – and other industries that appeal to the shiftless children of the international rich have also got in on the game. This April saw the opening in London of Condé Nast College, where young fashionistas can spend a year studying for the Vogue Fashion Foundation Diploma (tuition: £19,560), all the better to land that first job fetching coffee for Anna Wintour.

De Appel's programme might portend something darker: the transformation of the commercial art world into a place that increasingly requires a licence to practice. Galleries have remained informal despite their massive growth over the last two decades, and the traditional path to gallery employment has been an internship or two, sitting at the front desk and learning how to scowl. But the credentialism that has swept through industries from media to law is now

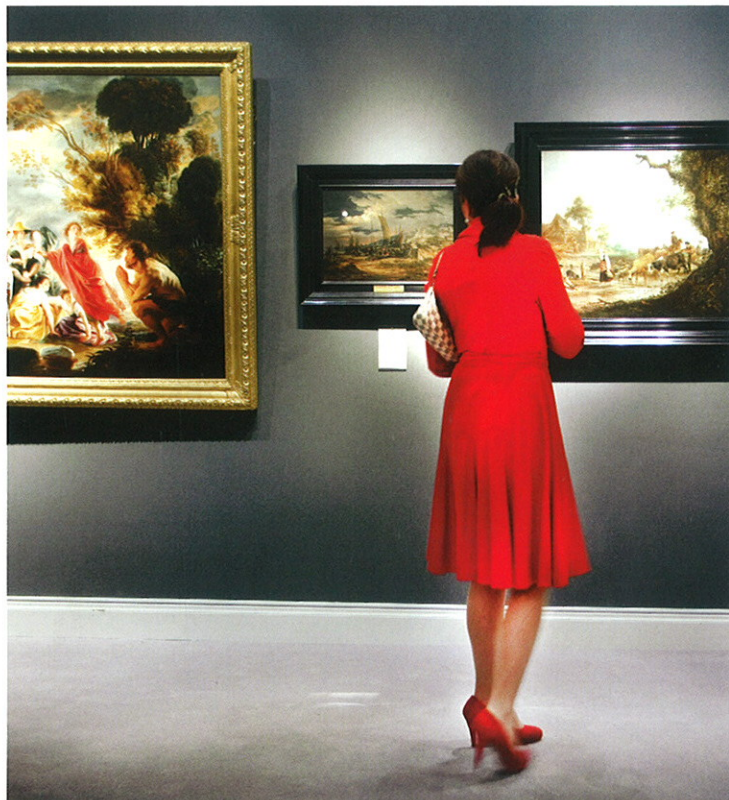
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coming to the art world, and you can guess whose interests that serves. Just as curatorial studies programmes have metastasized into profit centres for universities and even corporations, 'gallerist studies' programmes will surely multiply – erecting a further economic barrier in the guise of education. As entry to the art-world workforce becomes harder to secure, the advantages of spuriously academic credentials look ever sexier. And if you end up saddled with five figures of student debt to get such credentials, well, how else were you expected to land that internship anyway?

It's become a commonplace that the continued boom of the art market in the face of a global economic slowdown derives from growing income inequality in the US and Western Europe, even more than from the entrance of wealthy collectors from emerging economies into the global market. Yet as the economist Clare McAndrew recently demonstrated in a study of the art market for TEFAF Maastricht, the flourishing of galleries driven by this inequality is itself an unequal phenomenon – one

to which the participants of De Appel's programme should pay close attention. The top end of the market – defined as galleries selling more than £8.5 million of art annually – enjoyed a dazzling increase in sales last year: up 55 percent from the year before. Midmarket dealers, by contrast, were essentially flat year-on-year. And small galleries – defined as having an annual turnover of less than £425,000 – are suffering: they saw sales decline by 17 percent. The top five percent of dealers now account for more than half of the entire value of the art market, McAndrew estimates, while the kind of galleries that De Appel wants to cultivate are quickly becoming unsustainable. Teaching practical knowledge to young gallerists may be a fleeting ambition, therefore, and the real, bleaker future of such programmes is doubtless as a clearinghouse for the big boys – just another node in an ever-hardening system of privilege and power, dispensing credentials of low value and very high cost.

Jason Farago is a critic and columnist in New York, USA. He is a frequent contributor to the Guardian.



A visitor to the Paintings section at TEFAF Maastricht, 2013