

Editorial

When I did an internship at the London headquarters of an international auction house in the mid-1990s, the interior resembled an exclusive British gentlemen's club. The entrance hall was furnished with large armchairs scattered across an expanse of virtually indestructible, heavily patterned carpet in red and green. It also covered the grand staircase leading to what the eighteenth century founder had called his Great Rooms (the actual stairs were a product of the forward-looking 1950s, since the original had been destroyed in the Blitz). The pictures shown at auction previews were displayed in what the British call a Country House hanging (the Germans call it a St Petersburg hanging), with multiple rows and an order determined as much by size as by subject.

Visitors found the interior charming, reassuring, a touch intimidating, and cosy. It conveyed the brand of the firm as it was at the time: traditional, British, and open to newcomers up to a point. Contemporary art sales were a minor event, and across the building the staff held its collective breath during the biannual Impressionist evening sales on which the fortunes of the firm depended.

Today, stone flooring surrounds the same staircase. There is almost no furniture in the hall apart from wide, backless leather benches. Doors to the exhibition rooms are oversized and made of dark wood. And the picture preview hanging is sparse, with perhaps three carefully orchestrated pictures sharing one wall. Selling contemporary art is a big event, and the firm's brand is international, modern, open to those with the wherewithal to buy, while still a bit intimidating. Remaining carpeting is mushroom-coloured.

What does this comparison tell us about the function of display in the art market? It is driven as much by the firm positioning itself in the market, as by the expectations of its customers. Presentation most certainly has a bearing on whether and what a customer might buy. On the surface, where presentation resides by definition, recent changes in the space of only twenty years have been radical. Or do we only perceive them as such, because we lived through them?

In the 1990s, the customers often focused on a particular category. If someone loved seventeenth century English furniture, they would look for such pieces regularly. They

might buy a painting to accompany them, but their main focus typically was on one or two types of objects from a particular era or geographic origin. Today, buying is much more eclectic and appears to be motivated to a greater extent by professional advisers or by impulse. As everywhere, market movement has accelerated, and financial developments are followed more closely and over shorter periods of time, rather than between one generation and the next. In a globalised commercial world, exhibition practices for selling expensive goods align, be it at art fairs, auction houses, art galleries or luxury goods stores. At the same time, the fundamentals of the art market – the channels of selling, the role of expertise, the importance of taste and how it develops – remain unchanged, and online sales are merely another form of display rather than a sales platform.

On behalf of Bénédicte Savoy, Johannes Nathan and Dorothee Wimmer, I am delighted to present our issue on the subject of exhibiting art for sale where, in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's much-quoted words from the *Gattopardo* "everything needs to change, so everything can stay the same".

Susanne Meyer-Abich