

Biting the Hand That Feeds Them

A growing number of artists are poking fun at art-world inequities in their work—even as they participate in the system they critique



Joe Sola leaps through his studio window in his video *Studio Visit*, 2005. He trained with a movie stuntman to prepare for the piece.

COURTESY BLACKSTON, NEW YORK, AND NYE + BROWN, LOS ANGELES

The premise behind Joe Sola's 2005 video piece *Studio Visit* is simple. Over a period of two years, he invited collectors, curators, and critics to his Los Angeles studio to talk about his art. He would turn on the video camera, chat amiably for a few minutes, and then take a flying leap out the closed window in an explosion of shattered glass. His guests would dash to the window, only to find Sola chortling on top of a pile of strategically arranged cardboard boxes eight feet below. "People would scream with fear and pleasure at the same time," he recalls. He repeated this act 22 times.

Studio Visit brings together Sola's interest in performance art and in Hollywood filmmaking. (He trained with a stuntman to prepare for the piece, and the window glass was the breakaway kind used in action movies.) But the work also serves as a way of inverting the social dynamics of the art world. During a studio visit, power and authority usually rest with the curator or collector, whose decisions can determine the course of an artist's career. By rocketing out the window, however, Sola seized the upper hand. After his jump, he says, visitors would remain wide-eyed for the rest of the meeting. "It made the studio visit an exhilarating process," he recalls.

In a genre commonly known as institutional critique, artists for decades have used their work to lay bare the power structures of the art world or to expose its conventions. In 1970, Hans Haacke created an installation for New York's Museum of Modern Art that challenged the Vietnam War views of New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, one of the museum's board members. (Viewers were asked to answer whether they would vote for him or not in the next election.) In 1986, Chris Burden dug up the floor of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art in a work titled *Exposing the Foundation of the Museum*.

Many contemporary artists continue to make work that subverts the nature of institutional spaces. For example, Michael Asher's piece for the 2010 Whitney Biennial consisted of keeping the museum open for 72 hours straight. But a growing number of artists are creating works that hold up a mirror to a larger art universe: tweaking the powerful, documenting inequity, and reveling in the foibles of the culture.

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The anonymous collective known as the Bruce High Quality Foundation (also featured in the 2010 Whitney Biennial) has challenged the market-driven nature of arts education with a free “university” in Manhattan. In Los Angeles, figures like Sola, as well as various performance groups, have created pieces that comment on everything from power to exclusivity to bureaucratic inertia. On the East Coast, artists such as Jennifer Dalton, Ward Shelley, and Loren Munk sift through mountains of data to create drawings, installations, and paintings that chart the industry’s history, not to mention its biases.

“What’s important about this type of work is that it raises a question,” says Edward Winkleman, the Chelsea gallerist who represents Dalton, an artist who frequently tracks issues of gender inequity in her work. “And once that question has been raised, it makes it a lot harder to ignore.”

One of the biggest issues artists are tangling with is money, from its distribution to the way it has come to define artistic success. Many of the artists interviewed for this story were squeamish about the art market, and this sentiment is reflected in their work. Brooklyn-based William Powhida is an outspoken critic of what he considers to be the financially driven nature of the art world, producing scathing pencil drawings that chart networks of money and influence. In 2009, he collaborated with artist Jade Townsend to produce an oversize drawing that depicted Miami during Art Basel as a smoking Hooverville with bread lines. (Disclosure: Powhida has made reference to me in a few of his works.)

Last summer he took over the Marlborough Gallery’s space in Chelsea for a solo exhibition titled “POWHIDA.” The gallery was transformed into a louche den of artistic iniquity, where an unshaven, mirror sunglasses-wearing “Powhida” (played by an actor) lounged on black leather couches, behaving boorishly in the company of attractive women.

From the over-the-top language of the press release (“a divergent, yet coterminous installation”) to the single painting on view (an image of “Powhida” releasing a dove), the installation skewered art-world decadence. “Part of the goal was to use the press to curate hype,” explains the artist (the real one). It worked: the exhibition got plenty of ink.

In 2006, Dalton debuted an installation at New York’s Pulse Art Fair titled *The Collector-ibles*, in which she created a display case full of figurines that charted the *ARTnews* 200, the world’s most important art collectors as listed in this magazine. The piece reflects her frustration with the attitude among some collectors that art is just another luxury commodity. “I wanted to give myself a feeling of power,” she says of the work. “I wanted to turn them into trinkets.” Early in 2010, she and Powhida collaborated on a month-long show at Winkleman called *#class*, in which the pair turned the gallery into an improvised think tank and welcomed the participation of the broader artistic community. The issue of the art market was front and center: many artists expressed discomfort with the notion that ideas should have a price tag, even as they recognized that selling work allowed them the freedom to produce more.

The Bruce High Quality Foundation has also tackled the market issue. In late 2009, with support from the arts non-profit Creative Time, they founded BHQFU, a collaboratively run free “university” in which anyone could propose a class or sign up for one. The curriculum included courses on metaphor and “XXXtreme Performance Studies.” The group stated via e-mail that the project was a reaction to “the growth of the artist-education industry, specifically the rapid expansion of M.F.A. programs.” The current market-dominated system, the e-mail continued, prizes “uninventive thinking” and has led to “a whole hell of a lot of artists working on their resumes rather than their work.” The Bruces (as they are informally known) followed up BHQFU with a road trip in 2011 called “Teach 4 Amerika,”

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in which they visited arts programs around the United States to discuss the connection between arts education and the market in greater depth.

Certainly it is no small irony that many of these artists are active participants in the market they critique. The Bruces are represented by independent dealer Vito Schnabel, while Powhida recently joined Postmasters Gallery in New York, where his original drawings sell for between \$3,000 and \$15,000. Dalton, who is represented by Winkleman, has work that ranges in price from \$2,000 to \$25,000. Sola is represented by Nye + Brown in Los Angeles and Blackston Gallery in New York, where he had a solo show in October.

Powhida admits that selling work can leave him feeling a little like a contortionist: using the market to fund new work that criticizes the market. This past summer he created a large mixed-media piece for a fall solo show at Postmasters that tracks the ways in which some powerful figures were involved in the financial collapse of 2008. “Chances are, the dude who can buy this painting is a hedge-fund manager who is packaging bogus derivatives,” he says. “It puts me in a paradoxical position.”

Moreover, some critics have questioned whether work with hyperspecific art-world references is relevant to a larger audience. Independent curator and critic Christian Viveros-Fauné included six of Powhida’s works in the Dublin Contemporary 2011, an exhibition he cocurated in Ireland this past fall. He says that these works do have broader appeal. Powhida’s “criticism of the art world is a much larger criticism of the venality of sucking up to money all the time in every sphere,” Viveros-Fauné wrote in an e-mail to *ARTnews*. “I think parking his work solely within the art world is a setup for a superficial dismissal.”

“I don’t think art about art is inaccessible or just a joke,” says Gary Carrion-Murayari, who, as cocurator

of the 2010 Whitney Biennial, worked with Bruce High Quality Foundation. (He is now an associate curator at the New Museum.) “You can do work that speaks to several audiences—and I think that audiences are more sophisticated and aware than we in the art world give them credit for.” If anything, he was interested in some of what the Bruces were doing because it was accessible. “And it was funny,” he adds. “I appreciate things that are funny and irreverent.”

Money isn’t the only thing artists are talking about in works like these. Dalton’s drawings and installations have tracked everything from the way female cultural figures are visually portrayed in the *New Yorker* to the subjects discussed on critic Jerry Saltz’s Facebook page. Loren Munk, a Brooklyn-based painter represented by Lesley Heller Workspace in New York, has chronicled noteworthy art-world locations and figures in his pop-inflected canvases. And Finishing School, a performance-art collective from Long Beach, California, used its space at the last California Biennial, at the Orange County Museum of Art, to gather footage for an ongoing film project about . . . biennials.

Some artists are interested in drawing attention to disregarded corners of art history. Ward Shelley is an artist based in Easton, Connecticut, whose works are in the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art and who is represented by Pierogi Gallery in Brooklyn. He creates large-scale diagrammatic drawings resembling colorful alien viscera that chart the historical details behind various cultural phenomena. In one drawing, from 2006, he detailed the influences surrounding 1970s performance artist Carolee Schneemann.

The piece, he says, serves as a way to note the work and accomplishments of an artist he thinks has been overlooked by the establishment. “Narratives tend to be seeded in our culture by special interests,” he

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says. His drawings, he adds, are a way to insert new information between the dots of art history.

Other artists want to address issues of race and class in the art world. Orlando-based Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz has an ongoing video series called “Ask Chuleta,” in which a Puerto Rican homegirl (played by the artist) explains the ins and outs of art in an informal YouTube style. The artist, who comes from the Bronx, says she sought to create a work that stripped the art world of its overwrought jargon. “Chuleta” (which means “pork chop” in Spanish) rattles stream-of-consciousness tirades on everything from appropriation to feminism in a thick urban slang laced with profanities. This style is also employed by New York artist Jayson Musson, who last spring began posting web videos in the persona of Hennessy Youngman, a figure who also uses urban lingo to discuss art-world concepts. (His advice on how to be a successful black artist: Be angry and “paint niggas . . . doing historically white shit.”) In late February, Musson (as Youngman) will appear at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art in a series devoted to art and technology.

Raimundi-Ortiz says works such as these provide an opportunity to insert an unlikely person into a high-art context. “This is definitely a character who wouldn’t exactly be welcome at a gallery opening,” she says of Chuleta. “She would be looked at up and down.” Since she launched the series, in 2005, her videos have been shown at Manifesta and the Indianapolis Museum of Art. And, this past fall, her work was part of the exhibition “American Chambers,” at the Gyeongnam Art Museum in South Korea.

Ultimately, many of these works are steeped in a profound appreciation of art—even as they poke fun of it. In 2011, Sola produced a video series called “Cinematic ‘Artforum’ Reviews,” in which he had a voiceover artist narrate the magazine’s reviews of his shows in the style of a Hollywood movie trailer. The result: Jacques Lacan references are delivered in the sort of speech you’d generally hear attached

to a movie full of explosions. For Sola, these pieces represent a way of mixing two things he loves.

“I really enjoy reading art criticism and I enjoy listening to movie reviews,” he says. “Really, I just enjoy talking about art.” And there is no bigger tribute than to make work about it, too.

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