

Ethics in  
Contemporary  
Art

By Ryan Foote

Edition 2 English

# Ethics in Contemporary Art

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Takashi Murakami at Versailles 2010

The world as we knew it 50 years ago has changed, we now live in an age of overwhelming consumerism on an unprecedented rate which has led to the undeniable capitalism we know today and the art world as we know it is no exception. Artworks and artists have begun to inform and be informed by market trends, with artists like Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami shaping and writing art history of today, artworks bought and sold for their sheer blue chip status alone, living artists can sell works for more than dead masters and auction houses are not complete without some record breaking sale, the biggest art-ism today is not conceptualism or relationalism but capitalism welcome to the 'Capitalism Art Movement'.

Throughout history artists have been at the forefront reflecting and commenting on injustice, wrongs and equality in the world, from equal rights of women through to wars, artists have always tried to give a voice to these problems, but today we find in a post Andy Warhol world artists are more interested in 'the artist as identity' and 'shallow conceptual driven work' that responds to their own inner voice! I know this is an extremely simplistic view but when looking at trends within the art world the artist's voice has never had so much gusto, we find ourselves with a voice more than ever before, it is just a shame that instead of talking about crucial topics relating to the world today we are talking about ourselves.

Artists of today are no longer at the forefront commenting on these issues, issues that they directly contribute too and affect them, major societal issues of today like sustainability and global warming and yet, in fact we could be seen to be turning a blind eye on the subject and adding to the problem!

Is artwork of today anything more than entertainment wrapped up in layers of conceptual rhetoric?

With blockbuster exhibitions to entertain and draw the masses to justify the Government funding and provide glimpses into our past?



Exhibition of Artist Sophie Calle at Palais de Tokyo

Do we choose to turn a blind eye because the problem seems too big and complex? Or have we become so much apart of the system that we think the Government or someone else will solve it and we as individuals don't need to make an effort? Or is it that we are more interested with our own voice and mortality? Where has the artist inner ethical voice gone?

Today the artist voice can be more influential than ever and with internet and social networks we can reach more people than ever before, we need to step up and speak up! I am not talking about just pointing the finger at big companies, capitalism or Governments – as they did that in the 60's, I am talking about taking a good look at ourselves and what we are doing to the world as individuals, as practicing artists!

We are part of the system, we have no one else to blame for how we practice, we as artists need to change deal with the problems in our own studio first, before pointing the finger elsewhere!

This dilemma is not the same through all creative disciplines, certain creative industries have risen to the challenge and have started to look at these issues in depth Industrial designers and architecture are dealing with problems of sustainability and global warming by reducing their projects carbon footprint whilst engaging wider society within this debate through their creations, in the fashion industry there are designers like Gorman and Cylk that use organic and sustainable materials within their clothing collections. Countless designers are working on sustainable projects and within the architecture industry they have a green rating system that ranges from green on plan, green in construction, to long term green giving back to the power grid, big companies like Lend Lease are working on projects like this, yet as artists do you know where your paint comes from or how it is made?

Where the pigment in the paint comes from?

Where does the oil come from?

The zinc for the paint tubes?

Sculpture - does the timber you use come from tree plantations or from rain forests that have been deforested?

That MDF you use might have come from parts of the Amazon that have been deforested cut into wood chips shipped to China processed into MDF then shipped to you!

Within the education industry



Where are you materials coming from?

fashion, design, engineering, sciences and architecture most now have subjects on sustainability and ethics within their course work, but I have not come across one within the Fine Art University courses in Australia, yes the philosophy discussion will be thrown in but that is normally in response to beauty, aesthetics and perception not morals, ethics and responsibilities.

Students might need to submit their project to an ethics board if their supervisor feels it is needed but as far as teaching ethics and philosophy of fine art there are no courses that look at these issues.

Universities are faced with increasing student numbers and less staff, it is a fight to get funding and Universities are forced to create popularised subjects to get the money, where there once was a divide between education and business both with very different goals but now welcome to the University as a Corporate company.

How can we as artist address these issues? I am not saying we should all start making sculptures out of mud and straw or painting using raw ochre's on rocks, I am not suggesting we should stop making artwork and I am not saying we should be basing our artwork on these themes, but it is more about making informed decisions and choices about how we can improve our practice and ethics within the creative industry!

We should be thinking about these issues rather than waiting for the Government or someone else to make a change, make it for yourself!

I've primarily focused on the art world as it seems to be the most inactive of all the creative industries but this paper applies to the entire creative industry and possibly further.

I myself am not saying I am a perfect role model at times my own art practice has been problematic over the years making large artworks that have been engaging but not necessarily beneficial to society, simultaneously I had been cutting down my waste, recycle past projects and materials and trying to implement responsible practices within my studio, its one thing to see the problem's and ask the question's but another to do something about them.

As an artist and part of a creative community we can do more to induce change, whether it be raising debate or im