

IN CONVERSATION WITH

## Julian Stallabrass

Julian is a writer, photographer, art critic, curator and lecturer at The Courtauld Institute of Art. His primary focus is on the effects of politics, the economy and globalisation on contemporary art and New Media. He is currently involved in Inside Out Festival discussing how value is created in the contemporary art world. The Inside Out Festival runs from 19 - 25 October, and is organised by LCACE (London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange). [www.lcace.org.uk](http://www.lcace.org.uk).

### Can you tell me about Inside Out Festival and how you got involved?

It's a diverse festival of cultural events. I have been asked to be part of a panel talking about Sarah Rowles' book on gallerists, *12 Gallerists: 20 Questions*. She asked a wide variety of gallerists questions about what they display and why, collecting and investing, commerce and state support, and their answers are pretty interesting, often as much for what they do not say as for what they do. There is a curious disavowal of commerce, even among those gallerists that are purely commercial, which needs examining. Why should selling art be any different from selling any other luxury good?

### The value of contemporary art seems to mix your economic and political background, is this a crossover that defines contemporary art?

To say that art is defined by economics and politics (rather than merely be affected by them) is a scandalous position to take, for art's worth is that it is meant to offer a realm of culture which is meant to be relatively free of such vulgar forces, and offers both artists and viewers that chance to exercise their individual autonomy in making and appreciating work. Art does offer that, to an extent, in a way that the standardised products of the mainstream film and music industries do not. Yet contemporary art is also under increasing pressure from businesses and the state to perform various functions: to burnish the reputation of an oil company, for example, or to serve as a civilising influence on the "socially excluded". It is increasingly experienced in the heavily branded environment that museums have become. All this tends to erode art's ideal freedom, and thoughts about money and politics – the uses of art – intrude more and more.

### How do you feel the well-documented current economic recession has affected contemporary art?

The recession may be well "documented" in that there is a vast amount of coverage of it, but it is not yet well analysed. No one knows how long it will last, how deep it will be, and whether it will mark the end of the neoliberal experiment. The circumstances of its birth, its global reach and the speed with which it has hit growth are unprecedented, so we are in uncharted territory here. The effects on the business of art have already been dramatic with contemporary art auction sales in London falling in value by three-quarters. It is too soon to say what the effects will be over the character of contemporary art – though past recessions have produced profound cultural effects, often in pushing artists towards new business models as happened in the UK both in the 1930s and with the "young British artists".

### Do you feel that globalisation and the rise of online culture have changed the role and value of contemporary art?

Globalisation has had a profound effect on the art world since the fall of Eastern European communism. The hold that European and North American artists had over the production of contemporary art has been broken, and the



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art world has become more event-driven with biennials and art fairs in far-flung locations. As a result of this globalisation, and due to the long ‘war on terror’, much art has become more explicitly political and documentary and there emerges at least the ideal of a global cultural consciousness in which a great diversity of voices are heard. Yet many of the liberal virtues promoted by these events and the art works shown in them also have neoliberal economic and political inflections. As for the Internet, given the boom of the contemporary art market that only came to an end last autumn, the art world showed itself more than capable of holding to its niche – creating spectacular conversation pieces, unique or in very limited editions, to decorate museum halls and the rooms of billionaires. The extreme reproducibility, transmissibility of the Net, the lack of control over the environment in which something is seen, the erosion of ownership and copyright, the right that anyone has to comment – all this is anathema to core art world values.

### As artists inevitably aim to push boundaries, where do you envisage this going in the near future?

Arthur de Vany wrote a book about the economics of Hollywood in which he showed that no one, and certainly not producers, had any idea whether a film would be successful or not. The most you could say is that the vast majority would lose money, and a few would make a great deal. A film is released into a chaotic system, which cannot be predicted, and I suspect that the same is true of works of art. Yes, artists will “push boundaries” as they have to, but we should not forget the powerful forces of erasure and forgetfulness, so that the boundaries can be broken again and again.

### In a world where image is everywhere and “compassion fatigue” sets in, does the image have a world-altering impact any longer?

The concerted attempts to control our access to images, say of war, strongly suggest that images have power. The image management that surrounded the Iraq War, on the part of the press, the PR agencies and the military, helped to mould an image of the war that was politically pliant and comparatively bloodless. Far from seeing too many images of that war, we saw too few. I tried to show some of the images that I thought should be more widely seen when I curated the last Brighton Photo Biennial, *Memory of Fire*. Most of the visitors I talked to and who wrote in the comments books or on the website were not suffering “compassion fatigue” but were shocked by the extent to which their view of the war had been censored.