

# WHAT DOES THE EMERGING?

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The term 'emerging artists' is a relatively new one. It has itself emerged, and has done so over the past 25 years. At least, that is what one finds if one begins to look at how often the term appears in art publications over the past 30 years. For example, according to one academic database of over 500 periodicals covering art, design and humanities subjects, the term is barely evident at the beginning of the 1990s, appearing in three records in 1992. By 2002 it appears 16 times, and by 2012 the figure is 92.<sup>1</sup> Or, taking a much narrower and more specialist review of long-running visual art publications, the phrase appears only six times during the 1980s, 46 times during the 1990s, and over 200 times between 2000 and 2009.<sup>2</sup> The phrase doesn't turn up in *The Times* until 1984, while in the pages of the *Guardian* it appears only once a decade earlier – in 1974 in an article by the *Guardian*'s art critic Caroline Tisdall, who bemoans the lack of commercial support for emerging artists, and makes reference to the collector Ted Power, 'a gritty exception in his support of young emerging artists'.<sup>3</sup> But after that, 'emerging artist' disappears again until the late 1990s, when it begins to be used – perhaps unsurprisingly – in articles about the 'Young British Artists'.

ZABLUDOWICZ  
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But although the term is a relatively new one, artists have always 'emerged'; going through a process of establishing their presence in an artistic culture, gaining a reputation for their work above that of their peers, and progressively drawing attention to themselves so that they become visible in the culture and economy – and eventually history – of art. So 'emerging' has an everyday sense to it, its corollary being 'visibility', since the act of emerging, is, metaphorically, that of coming out of obscurity, out of the background and into the foreground. And no historical canon exists without the visibility of some and the obscurity of others. It seems only natural to use it to describe the careers of artists, and their rise to success.

Yet that passage itself, from obscurity to visibility, is one that an artist once made without its being discussed as a process of 'emerging'. Rather than emergence, youth was the usual term to designate artists in their careers. So in marked contrast, a search of *The Times* from 1940 to 1985 finds the term 'young artists' used on 1,475 occasions, exploding in the 1960s and 1970s. So why do we talk of emerging artists so much today?

Although the term 'emerging artist' is commonly used today, there is still remarkably little critical commentary on what it embodies, if it is to be understood as something other than 'young'. Understanding its development might shed some light on the nature of the institutional and cultural system in which contemporary artists now operate, especially in terms of the complex nature of patronage in contemporary art – whether this 'patronage' is that of collectors, curators, critics or others.

Writing in 1990 in the Canadian magazine *C*, the American critic Donald Kuspit complains of the eclipse of the artist who has a 'calling', declaring that 'most of today's artists have a career, not a calling'. 'The more crowded the art world', Kuspit writes, 'the more careers rather than callings seem evident.'<sup>4</sup> Kuspit goes on to disparage what he styles the 'hype of emergence':

<sup>1</sup> Source: Proquest: Arts & Humanities Index, in full-text articles. Accessed 03/05/2015.

<sup>2</sup> Source: EBSCO; Art Source full-text index, in titles *Artforum*, *Artnews*, *Art in America*, *Artweek*, *Flash Art*, *Art Newspaper*, *Art Review*, *Modern Painters*, *Art Monthly*, *Art Monthly Australia*, *Apollo*, *C*. Accessed 03/05/2015.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Tisdall, 'What's Gone Wrong with British Art', *Guardian*, 2 January 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Kuspit, 'The Hype of Emergence', *C*, March 1990, pp. 32–33 (p. 32).

‘Where emergence once meant that one differentiated oneself from and questioned the existing world of taste and thought, in the process making oneself unpopular, now it means conformity to it, as cleverly as possible, and becoming popular.’<sup>5</sup>

Kuspit’s attack on the ‘career artist’ and his nostalgic defence of a supposedly more authentic generation of artists who ‘pursued their art regardless of personal and social cost’ came just as the American art boom of the 1980s was drawing to a close. For Kuspit, ‘emergence’ was one symptom of the art world’s obsession with publicity, which ‘has become an end in itself, so that one attends to the publicity before one attends to the art’.

Kuspit’s complaint is, in essence, a criticism of the way in which the functioning of the system of the art world (its institutions, markets and social networks) eclipses the deliberation of the artistic or cultural value of the art itself. This is what we understand every day as ‘hype’. The ‘emerging’ artist, in this scenario, is both a publicity tag and the name for an attitude towards art-making which has become increasingly professionalised, and which lacks any further external motivation or commitment. Seventeen years later, at the height of the commercial and institutional boom in contemporary art of the 2000s, the American critic Katy Siegel could similarly bemoan the absence of a greater artistic vision (for her, the artistic project of Modernism) beyond career professionalism:

‘Today the idea of progress has disappeared. The only aspiration presented to a younger artist seems to be to fit into an existing social structure governed by the aesthetic mood of the moment; the art world that he or she enters demands art that, year by year, might be eccentric, DIY, political, nihilistic or shiny ... To “emerge,” an artist must respond to the climate, and so be recognized for being whatever it is we want today.’<sup>6</sup>

What these misgivings have in common is the sense that cultural and critical value is no longer the driving motivation of artists – in Kuspit’s case, artists have become complicit and cynical manipulators, ‘playing the game’ of the art system; in Siegel’s version, young artists are the hapless victims of the system, having to respond to whims of market and critical taste which they are powerless to influence. For both, the thing that produces the ‘emerging’ artist is an institutional system whose process no one has much control over.

It is of course questionable whether there ever was a moment when artists’ motivations were entirely isolated from the needs of economic survival or the desire for material success. But at the same time, these critics’ nostalgic evocation of an artistic culture not so penetrated by the preoccupations of career success has some ring of truth to it, at least if it allows us to consider how the figure of the ‘emerging artist’ might be connected to the developments that have marked the art world since the early 1990s. Rather than artists ‘emerging’, we might ask – from the perspective of 2015 – what kind of art world has ‘emerged’ in the preceding two decades.

The term ‘emerging’ has come to serve as an alternative to the more common ‘young’. Being young is a quality one possesses regardless of who else is interested in the fact of being a certain age. One is either young or not and, as a description, it is relatively objective. By contrast, to be ‘emerging’ always means being emerging in relation to some point of view elsewhere. The metaphorical device of emergence is the move from obscurity to visibility. But visibility presumes some position from which one is doing the looking, from outside. ‘Emerging’ is a relational term. The question, then, is to what, or who, emerging artists are becoming visible.

This isn’t just a matter of an arbitrary semantic fashion. As those critics I’ve quoted suggest, artists have become increasingly aware of, and part of, an art world ‘system’. That awareness of the art world as an all-encompassing professional system also extends to others who are part of it, those who Siegel precisely describes as ‘participant observers like myself (collectors, curators, critics, fans)’.<sup>7</sup> To ‘emerge’, then, is to become visible on the ‘scene’ of this professional system of ‘participant observers’. The ‘emergent’ is what is identified as that which is beginning to take its place in this system of interrelated ‘participant observers’.

One might again argue that, just as artists have always ‘emerged’, there has always been a professional ‘scene’ made up of artists and ‘participant observers’ – critics, curators,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Katy Siegel, ‘Butterflies Are Free: The Problem with Emerging Artists’, *Modern Painters*, December 2006, pp. 96–99 (p. 99).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

collectors, art school tutors, museum directors, and various forms of art fans, enthusiasts and wider publics. But to treat the conditions of art as set and unchanging denies us any historical account of how things have changed. What distinguishes the development of the world of contemporary art in the past two decades is the expansion of its scale and reach, which is in many aspects entirely unprecedented, and a consequent professionalisation of the institutions and individuals that make up the 'world' of contemporary art. Since the end of the Cold War (and, coincidentally, the collapse of the art market bubble of the late 1980s), another kind of art world has developed, characterised by ever-more elaborate connections between artistic centres across cultural and national boundaries. In a very material sense, the art world is a *world* art world, a global system that is bigger than any one local or even national 'scene', and no longer divided by the old demarcations of East and West, capitalist and communist, which marked so much of the 20th century.

Perhaps, here, 'network' is a better term than 'system', and it is no surprise that the notion of the 'network' has come to preoccupy recent commentary on the changing character of what we habitually call the art world. In his book *Your Everyday Art World*, the American critic and academic Lane Relyea gives an account of how the art world since the 1990s has metamorphosed from a narrowly hierarchical, discontinuous set of discrete, mostly nationally based institutional frameworks, to a circulation of professional and institutional connections which favour immediacy, fluidity and distribution over permanence and enduring value. As Relyea argues:

'Today the art world no longer resembles a pyramid with one city as its apex. It is a horizontal matrix. Prestige now accrues not to any single city, exhibition, or art event, but to the lines between, the routes of connection, distribution, and circulation that interlace the various centers and gatherings. The ability to shuttle along these pathways, to partake in the network's scaffolding of spokes and nodes, is what keeps competition heated.'<sup>8</sup>

If the art world, post-1990, is characterised by such internationalisation and horizontal distribution, we can begin to see how this might relate to the trope of the 'emerging artist'. In such an art world, there is less opportunity for those 'participant observers' to have a close relationship with the activities of artists. Instead, a large, mobile and dispersed population of artists operates through local nodes in a bigger network of localities, institutions and projects; we can begin to see how, from any one point in that bigger reality, only some partial view of what is happening can be 'seen'.

This, in part, explains the growing ubiquity of the figure of the 'emerging artist'. Historically, art 'scenes' have been relatively narrow and focused communities, where individuals who were involved in the activity of the scene were more or less professionally and personally familiar with the others involved. In such circumstances, the idea of discussing artists as 'emerging' makes little sense, since there was little distance, professionally and personally, between artists and other participants. With the great expansion of the post-1990 art world, however, any one participant's awareness of the greater whole of the art world becomes more distanced and fragmented. As Relyea notes, 'calling the art world a system ... assumes the growth of a milieu beyond the studio and the immediate peer community to something larger, more anonymous, more technically integrated, self-modifying and self-regulating.'<sup>9</sup> Emergence, in this bigger, decentred and fragmented art world, is the concept by which any one participant negotiates the experience of the anonymity and opacity that characterises the functioning of the greater art world.

But this brings us to a key problem in the discussion of what the concept of the 'emerging' really represents, in terms of the way in which the value of artists and their work is negotiated and established. After all, who has the authority to declare that an artist is an 'emerging artist'? No single individual or participant can declare an artist 'emerging' on the basis of their sole, isolated opinion. It is one of the more paradoxical aspects of the 'emerging' that no single participant in the art world seems responsible for declaring that an artist should be seen as an 'emerging' artist. The decision regarding whether an artist has emerged always appears to have been already decided *by others*. To say that an artist is an emerging artist is to declare a truth about their significance whose authority is already established, anonymously, by the greater consensus of the art world as a whole. Empirically, one can point to all kinds of objective justifications to support the validity

<sup>8</sup> Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Relyea, p. 27.

of an artist's emergence onto the 'scene' – a growing CV list of exhibitions, acquisition into private and public collections, sales records at auction and so on. No doubt those metrics are of much interest to others in a professional art context. But to rely on them as the authority that *explains* the significance of an artist as 'emerging' is a sort of empty tautology, since the reasons why an artist has accumulated a CV of exhibitions, collections and auctions are never made explicit. Instead, the very fact of those metrics is enough. The cultural, critical and artistic questions that might provide the basis for an artist's significance have already been established elsewhere, by others. And as that significance is established, it reaches a sort of 'critical mass', at which point an artist appears sufficiently supported by the rest of the system to allow for other parts of the network to declare them 'emerging'.

There is no such thing, in the everyday vocabulary of the art world, as an 'emerged' artist. ('Mid-career' doesn't quite map onto 'emerged', either.) It's a sort of linguistic blind spot which confirms that the emerging is not a quality of artists or their work, but is instead a projection of the functioning of the professional system of the art world, which processes the competing claims of aspirant artists in a distributed process of reputation-building across and among a wide variety of institutional participants. This is why the emerging does not have to be young, since it is an aspect of the system's dealings with the individual, not the individuals themselves.

Why should we be concerned with this new relationship between artists and the culture and economy of the system they operate in? At the very least, it is clear that in the emergence of the 'emerging', we see a system in which the institutions that make up the system have come to hold a controlling influence over the way artists gain access to visibility within the system. Museum chiefs, curators and biennial directors all wield significant influence over the fortunes of artists, and while collectors and auction houses draw much attention for sky-high prices, their influence in reputation-building is balanced against the influence of those others. In many ways, the new institutional cultures of the art world are more sophisticated and proactive in shaping the critical economy that privileges some artists over others than those older more conservative institutions against which artists set themselves from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s. The point here is that it is the new institutional cultures of art – which are often the descendants of the counter-cultural and radical practices of the 1960s to the 1980s – that have gone through a process of professionalisation and 'managerialisation', generating a more systematic network of 'gatekeeper' professions and functionaries which in turn produce the figure of the 'emerging artist'.

There are two serious issues at stake here. The first is that in this historical period of professional normalisation, new artists have to negotiate a system from which they can take no 'outside' position. This has consequences for any possibility of an art that has aspirations to radically change the orthodox culture it inhabits. The second, related, issue is that as the validation of emergence becomes more technical and anonymous – adopting an increasingly metrics-based culture of evaluation that mimics the algorithmic and big data approaches of digital culture – the possibility of deliberating the cultural and artistic value and significance of artwork recedes. This is not to say that those debates do not figure in the process of reputation-building – curators, critics and others have *explanations* for their support of artists, inevitably – but rather that once the process of emergence reaches a certain level of anonymity and collective consensus, those cultural and artistic debates are no longer visible. Symptomatic of this is the feeble level of critical debate about art at the most public level, where artists deemed to be of significance by the system as a whole are no longer challenged by other voices – in art magazines, newspapers or online. Once their status is already agreed, consensus trumps critical debate.

The emerging artist, then, is a new figure. It is the projection of a new systematisation of evaluation that has become anonymous as cultural evaluation and critical judgement recede from the wider public arena. Its product is an increasingly homogeneous culture of contemporary art in which everyone increasingly agrees about what is interesting and what is not, while becoming unaccountable for those decisions in public, at the same time as dissenting and conflicting voices are forced to the margins. As I suggested at the beginning, this has consequences for all forms of patronage that seek to meaningfully support new art, since the process of consensus-forming is technical and self-justifying. And the danger

with such technical and self-validating processes is that they have a tendency to eat their own tails, since eventually, no individual participant takes responsibility for the decisions made by the whole.

In those circumstances, the future might lie less in the 'emerging artist', and more in the artist whose art runs counter to the consensus forms of critical validation generated by the new, globalised, networked processes of our increasingly professionalised art world. And in support of that, the various forms of patronage – collectors, curators, critics and others – might seek to encourage cultural and artistic values that stand in contrast to the consensus; to celebrate difference and disagreement, and rediscover and reinvent the culture of open critical debate which is threatened by the anonymous, professional functioning of the art world. Otherwise, the emerging artist never stops emerging, while the scene into which they appear remains as it is, unchanging, unseen and unquestioned.

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