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Why The Art World Needs To Pay Attention To The Ongoing Supply Chain Crisis



Installation view of Ben Brown Fine Arts booth at Frieze London, 2021. Photo by L of Frieze.

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The global supply chain crisis is revealing the pitfalls of prioritising accelerated gains and consumption. The art world, in its current market boom, needs to take action before it's too late.

TEXT: Reena Devi

IMAGES: Courtesy of various

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(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ben-brown-fine-arts-frieze-london-2021_51585255434_o.jpg)

Installation view of Ben Brown Fine Arts booth at Frieze London, 2021. Photo by Linda Nyind. Image courtesy of Frieze.

Just last month, amidst the allure of being back at a real-life major art fair and seeing people buy art with their endless wealth, a few Frieze London exhibitors including Parisian gallery Mor Charpentier reportedly (<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/10/13/brexit-blues-at-frieze-due-to-red-tape>) faced issues such as their art being held up in transport blockages. This was due to changing customs rules caused by Brexit, and a “shortage of drivers” (<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/10/13/brexit-blues-at-frieze-due-to-red-tape>) leading to “fuel and food supply strife”.

Additionally, another three galleries, including Applicat-Prazan from Paris, decided not to take part in this year’s fair because of the lack of clarity around customs rules due to Brexit.

However, the art world’s logistical issues are not specific to the geopolitical concerns of Brexit. In fact, the internecine nature of the global supply chain means that seemingly unrelated aspects can affect one another, for example, shortage of containers and truck drivers, a pandemic, or climate change and its related ecological disasters.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/A-Chinese-worker-looks-on-as-a-cargo-ship-is-loaded-at-a-port-in-Qingdao-eastern-China's-Shandong-province.-Photo-Courtesy-of-AFP-Contributor-AFP-and-Getty-Images.jpeg>)

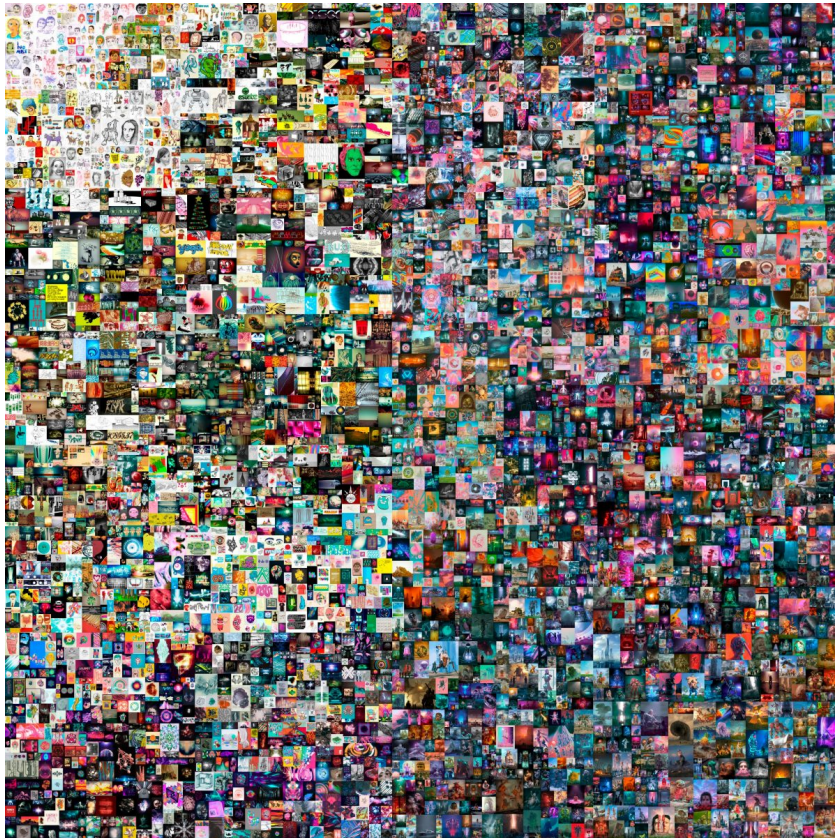
A Chinese worker looks on as a cargo ship is loaded at a port in Qingdao, eastern China's Shandong province. Image courtesy of AFP Contributor, AFP and Getty Images.

One of the worst things to come out of the pandemic is surging consumer demand, even as social inequity widens; this consequence, along with COVID19-related warehouse closures and a slew of other mitigating factors, has disrupted the worldwide supply chain. While major consumer markets, such as the US, are “running out of everything (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/america-is-choking-under-an-everything-shortage/620322/>)”, growing consumer demand is exerting further pressure on the supply chain and expecting it to “go into overdrive (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/america-is-choking-under-an-everything-shortage/620322/>)”. In fact, container owners are sending empty containers to China to benefit from the increase in shipping costs to the US due to surging demand. Talk about a blatant display of prioritising profit over all else.

The ongoing crisis' impact

(<https://crosscut.com/culture/2021/10/shipping-and-supply-chain-issues-shake-seattle-arts>) on galleries and museums awaiting artwork shipments, as well as theatre and opera productions, authors and book publishers, is reason enough for the art world to pay attention to supply chain issues.

However, it also represents a larger red flag regarding the way we consume, even in the art world. The pandemic-era shift to online auctions engendered change, not just in the kinds of artworks being purchased—more digital art, NFTs, paintings; less sculptures—but also in buyers and their reasons for doing so.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Beeples-Everydays-The-First-5000-Days-2021-a-non-fungible-token-that-sold-at-Christies.-Photo-courtesy-of-Christies..jpeg>)

Beeple, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021, non-fungible token (jpg), 21,069 x 21,069 pixels (319,168,313 bytes). Image courtesy of Christie's Images Ltd 2021.

During the pandemic, bored wealthy people began to entertain themselves by outgunning one another in online auctions for luxury items such as jewellery, watches, furniture, sports cards, vintage cars, limited edition shoes, and crypto art, turning every luxury acquisition into an “alternative asset class

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/20/style/spending-rich-people.html?smid=tw-share>)”. Now, rich people, and the aspirational class who shop too much, are no longer collectors, but investors.

Without missing a beat, the industry responded and profited in kind. Phillips announced the launch of its art advisory platform to source artworks on the primary market in April this year. A month later, Sotheby's reported profits and issued a US\$300 million (https://www.ft.com/content/e0296097-fb00-409d-b9b2-3fab02185da6) dividend to its owners. Just from June 2020 to June 2021 alone, the contemporary art market raked in a record-breaking US (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/artprice-annual-art-market-report-art-world-rebound-1234605607/) \$2.7 (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/artprice-annual-art-market-report-art-world-rebound-1234605607/) billion (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/artprice-annual-art-market-report-art-world-rebound-1234605607/) in sales, according to Artprice's annual report.



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Kiaf-SEOUL-2021.-Photo-by-Kiaf-SEOUL-Operating-committee.-Courtesy-of-Kiaf-SEOUL.-11.jpg)

KIAF Seoul 2021. Photo by KIAF Seoul Operating Committee. Image courtesy of KIAF Seoul.

As the world opened up a bit more this year, brisk sales were being reported at art fairs and an unprecedented boom witnessed in art markets of specific regions and cities. This means even more pressure on the global supply chain, which is not merely containers and ships but people behind the machinery whose welfare and livelihoods matter. One

of the reasons for the ongoing truck drivers shortage in different parts of the world are their increasingly untenable working conditions. The art world, and its upper echelons busy clicking buttons to bid on art, can no longer keep ignoring these issues and the people facing the brunt of them.



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DSC_0374_ForWeb.jpg)

Digital Art Fair Asia 2021. Image courtesy of Digital Art Fair Asia.

To be fair, the digital world and, by extension, the digital art market, seem to present possibilities to relieve such pressures, but for now, the focus remains on IRL aspects of the digital experience. In Singapore, where NFT whales and start-ups congregate, the recent biggest NFT-related digital art exhibition, “Right Click + Save”, was held in the highly physical infrastructure of Le Freeport, an integrated facility known for its role in the art world’s supply chain business. Physical and hybrid NFT exhibitions and spaces have been launching (<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/04/23/nfts-in-irl-the-rise-of-digital-art-galleries-in-physical-spaces>) around the world since early this year.

Moreover, the global supply chain faces the likelihood (<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/19/climate-change-supply-chain-disruptions-how-to-prepare.html#:~:text=Extreme%20weather%20events%20also%20hit,the%20United%20Nations%20Development>

of consistent disruptions from geographical disasters caused by the worsening climate crisis

(<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/09/cop26-sets-course-for-disastrous-heating-of-more-than-24c-says-key-report>). The COP 26 United Nations Climate Change Conference, which took place in Glasgow Scotland this month, saw “keynote pledges (<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/cop26-chasm-opens-between-words-climate-action-2296996>) to end deforestation, phase out coal and mobilise trillions for green investment (<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/cop26-chasm-opens-between-words-climate-action-2296996>)”—all during its very first week. But experts remain unconvinced that most of the summit discussions and promises are beyond PR spin.

With all this to take into account, conspicuous consumption (<https://www.ft.com/content/29aadf7b-10c3-4a02-b70e-dc87c474fa9d>) is ultimately not a viable path for the art world to stay on, even if accelerated gains seem to be the predominant priority right now. *The Atlantic* writer Derek Thompson views (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/america-is-choking-under-an-everything-shortage/620322/>) the global supply chain crisis as part of a broader issue on how we typically create scarcity in terms of manufacturing and supply. He cites this as a rare opportunity to take on a whole new outlook, “supply-side progressivism (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/19/opinion/supply-side-progressivism.html>)”, which pushes for “across-the-board abundance”. Perhaps it is high time for the art world to start exploring such notions seriously, rather than getting swept up in the age of acceleration.

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