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What art dealers did next: curate their intellectual environment

Sophisticated programming puts cultural offerings from commercial galleries on a par with institutions

A sculptor's studio, mid-century. A psychiatric hospital, circa 1945. An haute-boho Parisian apartment, somewhere around 1968. These are just a few of the elaborately set-dressed art fair booths that we've seen in recent years, showcasing gallery art in a way that smashes the white cube model. A "salon hang" — with multiple pictures beside and above each other, covering a wall — has for years been the epitome of uncool; suddenly, it can look fresh and vivid. The placing of artworks within a staged domestic environment has become an interesting sales tool, as well as a potentially liberating curatorial approach.

It is not only the physical environment of works of art that is attracting such close attention: now, galleries also curate their intellectual environment. The publishing of serious studies, even full-on glossy books, on gallery artists has become the norm among the large galleries: Gagosian, Pace, David Zwirner and others have substantial publishing operations. Digital back-up is standard, too, as are talks, discussions, events and more.



WH Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender in 1937 © Howard Coster / National Portrait Gallery, London / Scala, Florence

Everything, in fact, that was once the intellectual territory of the public institutions. We expected critical discussion at Tate, hardly at Hauser & Wirth. But that has changed; have the commercial galleries actually taken over the intellectual high ground?

They have the means to do so, of course. If a work by a blue-chip artist is selling for millions, the profitability of an accompanying book hardly matters — a scholarly monograph always lends cachet and will be an attraction for buyers.

The same can be said for sophisticated loans and curatorial set-ups. In 2010 Gagosian filled its King's Cross gallery in London with a show entitled *Crash*, referencing the writer JG Ballard and the artists who had responded in some way to his work — a smart way of making up a show (partly on loan, partly for sale) that encompassed artists as disparate as Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, Roy Lichtenstein, Jenny Saville and Tacita Dean.

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At about the same time, Helly Nahmad in Cork Street assembled all four of Matisse's monumental bronze "Backs" part of a show of resplendent paintings. Some of them were presumably for sale, or could have been; what really stayed in the memory was that a Cork Street dealer was borrowing works from Tate. Something seemed to have changed.

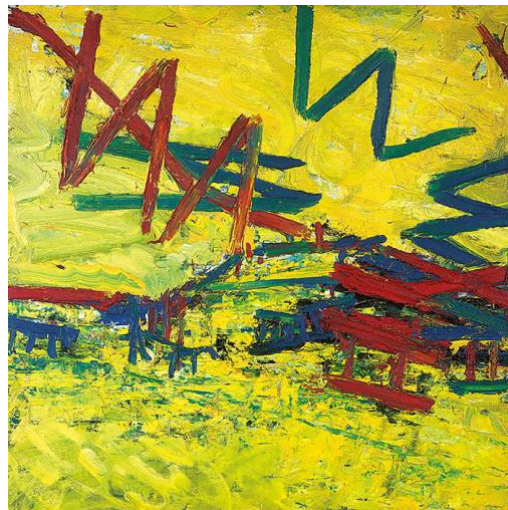
Another elaboration of the curated environment will be seen at Frieze this year, on Hauser & Wirth and Moretti Fine Art's booth dedicated to the artistic circle of the poet and editor Stephen Spender. As with Ballard, Spender's own cultural world was primarily literary — he was the second syllable of the left-liberal group of writers of the 1930s and 40s dubbed MacSpaunday (consisting of Louis MacNeice, Spender himself, WH Auden and Cecil Day-Lewis). Cosmopolitan, cultured, communist-leaning (in the 1930s Spender went to Moscow and to the Spanish civil war to report for *The Daily Worker*), they were a particular kind of cultural elite, extremely well-connected in some ways, outsiders in others — mainly because many of the group were homosexual at a time when it was still illegal.



Portrait of Stephen Spender (1934) by Henry Moore © Dominic Brown Photography/The Henry Moore Foundation/DACS;

Spender himself had a complicated personal life: there were gay relationships both shallow and deep before his marriage to pianist Natasha Litvin in 1941, which lasted until his death more than 50 years later. And although family life with their two children was close and happy, Spender never really gave up on what he called the "queer" side of himself.

His range of associations and friendships stretched from TS Eliot and Virginia Woolf to artists such as Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Arshile Gorky and many others. Spender himself collected work from many of them; beyond that, their shared aesthetic beliefs and interests informed his writings and their art. As his son Matthew Spender, a sculptor, writes: "[My father] believed in the 'shared subject matter of art', and he studied his collection hoping to find clues about his writing. Looking at a painting or a sculpture, or reading a poem, or listening to a piece of music, were to him part of the same experience, because the initial spark of creativity came from the same interior experience."



Frank Auerbach's 'Primrose Hill, Summer' (1968) © Todd-White Art Photography

This quote is from an essay that Matthew Spender has contributed to Hauser & Wirth's clever publication, *The Worlds of Stephen Spender*, which supports their display. With a design inspired by *Horizon*, one of the magazines Spender founded and edited in the late 1930s, it contains articles on censorship and other issues that he cared about, as well as copious illustrations, essays, poems, photographs and more: a lovely keepsake.

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Eduardo Chillida's 'Enparantza (Square)' (1990) © Zabalaga-Leku, DACS, London 2018

This deep dive into the artistic milieu of an era is a smart curatorial move: even the smaller and less distinguished works will shine more brightly in such company, and carry with them the resonance of the whole. And beyond providing a lure for buyers and a satisfying spectacle for the general public, research and editorial/curatorial care of this quality is a genuine intellectual contribution: who knew that art fairs, those temples of brash commerce, would throw up such occasional goodies? Other galleries, too, are looking to cultural and historical context in assembling their exhibitions. Another example that is based around a personality comes from Lévy Gorvy gallery, whose show boasting the entertaining title Lord Duveen, My Pictures Never Look So Marvellous As When You Are Here uses the celebrated collector and tastemaker to present (in a “Duveen-style hang”) work by artists from Diane Arbus and Alighiero Boetti to Yves Klein, Seung-taek Lee and Kazuo Shiraga — all in the Bond Street premises which were once Duveen’s home.

Even further from the once-immutable gallery model are some non-commercial — or at least less obviously commercial — initiatives. The podcast craze has certainly spread to the gallery world (see below), and among many others Sean Kelly’s example stands out. In his series entitled Collect Wisely the eponymous gallerist himself interviews collectors about their buying and their personal passions; his vision, he says, is to question “the nature of collecting and connoisseurship in the 21st century, and in doing so . . . to inspire a new generation of collectors and individuals committed to making a meaningful investment in our shared cultural future.” Fine words — and yes, of course galleries must look to their future client-base. But what is significant here is that Kelly omits, or edits out, any reference to his gallery’s own relationship with his interviewee, and the series includes collectors who are not his clients. The talk is of knowledge and research, of passion, taste and understanding, of educating one’s eye and getting inside an artist’s sensibility — not of prices and investment and fairs and sales. As the season of art-market craziness revs up, it’s a salutary reminder of what the whole thing is supposed to be about.



Collect Wisely podcast interview with Gregory Miller and Sean Kelly (right)

soundcloud.com/collectwisely