

# HBO'S 'THE PRICE OF EVERYTHING' (2018): A DOCUMENTARY BY NATHANIEL KAHN

## JAKOB ZAIMAN LONDON - 2018



**Oliver Barker in action**

As so often with documentaries that try to come to terms with contemporary art, the real subject seems to evade capture. The title suggests we are in search of something like an 'understanding of value', meaning that behind the astronomical prices currently being realised for works of art, there is a perception that buyers are not so much interested in the works themselves, only in their asset-worthiness. In other words, no one really cares anything about the art, only about the money.

Not an easy idea to explore visually, but Khan's plan is to let the facts speak for themselves. So he documents key aspects of the moneyed artworld by showing successful artists and their artworks interspersed with interviews with a variety of relevant experts and dealers, all the while leading up to an anticipated Sotheby's extravaganza (c1:20:00). This is fine as far as it goes, but the problem is that none of the experts involved are themselves exactly sure what the 'art' of contemporary art is all about, and so are unable to offer anything particularly insightful. And asking artists to talk about art can also be something of a let-down, as they often have no idea what they are playing at and tend to resort to banalities.

This doesn't mean the unfolding of events, overlaid with authoritative but slightly shallow commentary, isn't entertaining to watch: it is. And we still get to witness the problems besetting contemporary art directly, even if by default, and in the absence of editorial guidance.

As a starter, there is the populist sentiment – surprisingly decades old now – that contemporary art objects are ludicrously overvalued, and that a reckoning of sorts ought to be on the cards. Gavin Brown, himself a dealer, thinks that he can 'smell smoke' (1:10:52), but it's not

clear exactly what he means by this. Is this smouldering the result of buyers starting to lose an interest in art, or is it their dawning realisation that they're not quite sure what they are paying for ?

This is really where the essence of the 'problem' with contemporary art lies: nobody knows what the 'art' of contemporary art amounts to, so people are parting with money on the basis of what gets to be described in the film as a 'fashionable consensus' (c49:00). As far as asset management goes, this is neither here nor there – let the enablers like Sotheby's Amy Cappellazzo monitor the market for you (c1:02:03) – but if anyone is genuinely interested in the art itself, and wants to know if what they are buying has real worth, an entirely different set of ideas need to be brought into play.

For a work of art to have genuine value, not as a tradable commodity but as 'itself', it has to form part of a revelatory narrative with substantial and cogent content. It has to have more to it than surface features, or its value as a mere 'recognisable' image. And it has to be more than a mere relic. The Mona Lisa, for example, is a crafted relic of a bygone age, and its 'meaning', such as it can be said to have one, is entirely limited to its historical context and the techniques employed to realise it. There is nothing to the Mona Lisa beyond that, and although the image may have its own fascination as an instance of highly crafted portraiture, it is spectacularly dull as an artwork, as it does not possess any narrative content, or anything particularly interesting to say about itself other than the decidedly obvious. And this in turn is true of almost all the classical museum pieces: they are all about the realisation of narrow classical conceptions and sensibilities, which explains why wandering around art museums and national galleries can be something of an ordeal: worthy, perhaps, but also faintly boring, as the 'wow' factor can only deliver so much before it begins to tail off (see Alexander Nemerov, art historian, at the Frick Collection c28:14).

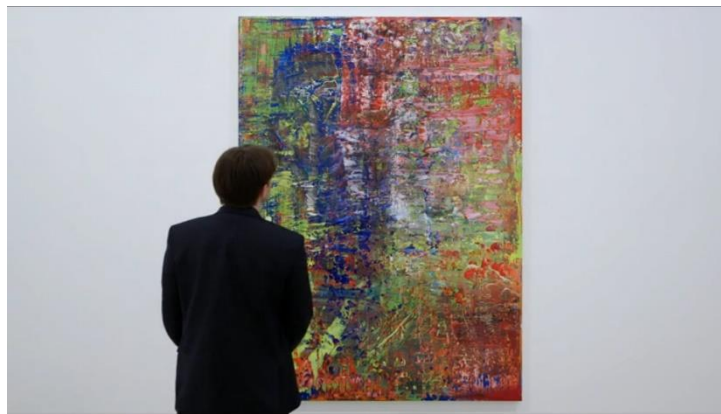
Is this all there is to art ? Not if you know what to look for, and it seems that most people – even the art professionals – don't know where to start. The transition from 'classical' to 'contemporary' has not brought with it a crucial change in perspective, and so still languishes in the idea of 'art' as a mixture of cultural artefact and crafterly technique, with 'value' as a function of desirability. And desirability in turn is a mixture of recognisability and fashionable consensus, the consensus being generated and sustained – or diminished – by changeable ideas as to what is 'current' or 'interesting' or 'artistically substantial'. This whole train of thought is somewhat circular and insubstantial, and cannot come to rest on anything like solid ground, which is exactly why dealers are constantly alert to a possible day of reckoning when someone will call time on much of the duplicitous waffle which counts as sales talk.

Then what to look for ? You look for content. Content, as opposed to surface imagery is everything in contemporary art. What is content ? Content is the totality of the artistic narrative represented by a particular artwork. What is the artistic narrative ? It is the theatrical declaration – and all its directly related avenues – presented to the viewer by the artist through their artwork or works. Put more simply, it is the information contained in, and represented by, the theatrical meaning of an artwork, not as a merely sensual and aesthetic experience, but as a portal to a more imaginative type of experience. In the same way that an item of clothing, closely associated with a particular person, can generate an imaginative encounter not only with that person but with their world, so carefully conceived artworks can do exactly the same thing; only this time it is not necessarily the mundane world being represented, but a narrative and imaginary one. For example, a Joseph Beuys sculpture is not an ersatz Rodin, it is a portal to the Beuys world, and in its own way an infinitely more interesting invitation than that presented by a classical sculptural pose; the same is true of the technically shoddy but arresting works of Andy Warhol, or the technically sophisticated works of Jeff Koons; in both cases these works are items which conjure

up distinctive theatrical environments which extend way beyond the immediate aesthetic features on display. Narrative artistic content is not about the relative superficiality of sensual beauty; it is about inviting you to partake in a mentality, or to view another modality of experiencing. The more powerfully an artwork can pitch you into its own realm of theatrical narrative, the better the art.

The problem is that the popular conception of art conceives each and every artwork as a standalone object, to be assessed according to classical principles of skilled technique and traditional subject matter. In this view, you compare a Warhol to a Caravaggio, and a Koons to a Donatello, and decide in both cases that the modern works are seriously 'insubstantial'. But this is an astonishingly blunt and blinkered view of the possibilities of art, and doesn't even begin to acknowledge the opportunities which extend beyond judging objects in terms of mere sensual beauty. And it is this basic inability to recognise – and inhabit – a realm beyond classical conceptions of 'art as crafted beauty' which explains why there is an ongoing sense that all of contemporary art could turn out to be nonsense, and that a collective awakening might be about to bring the whole market crashing down.

Does this mean that, as essentially narrative objects as opposed to aesthetic ones, all of contemporary art is somehow validated? Of course not: much of it is as superficial as it appears to be. Much contemporary art is simply not able to act as a portal to a distinctive theatrical realm, and so remains, despite the best efforts of its creators, at a level no higher than that of 'creative crafting'. This is not the fault of the artist; this is the fault of the artistic muse, which has failed to bless that artist and their creations with access to the interesting, or the unsettling, or the revelatory.



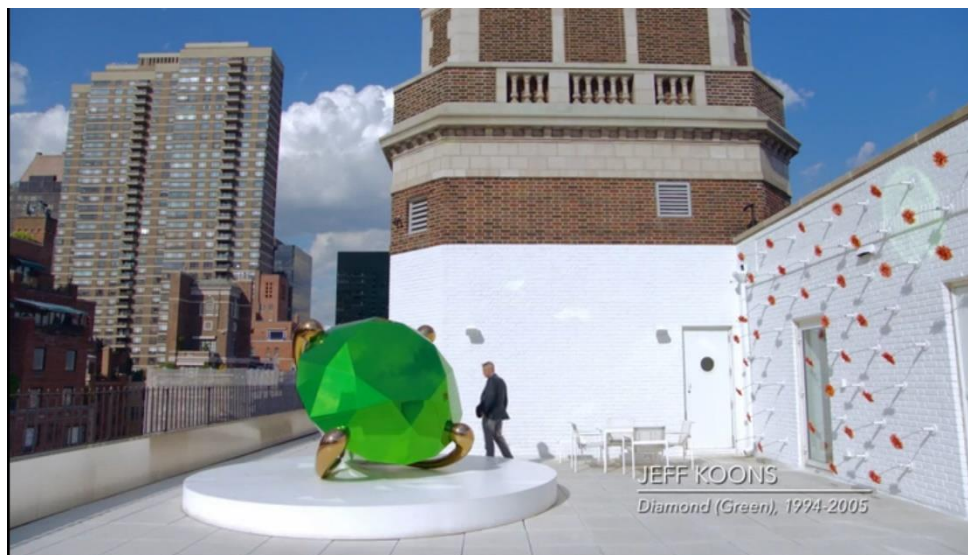
**A Richter abstract**

As an aside, it needs to be said that one of the most vacuous genres of modern and contemporary painting is that of 'abstraction', where colourful splotches and swirls on a canvas are imbued with a significance beyond mere ornamentation. The idea that splotches can be 'meaningfully interpreted' is an idea well worth investigating, and testing objectively, but anyone who does so will soon realise that it is a complete waste of time and goes nowhere. It is possible for abstract painters to develop a markedly distinctive style, but the style invariably ends with itself, and cannot generate narrative content which can develop into something approaching an involving theatricality. A 'Pollock' is just a large-scale decorative work with a highly characteristic method and style, but there's nothing more profound to them than that (see Jerry Saltz on Pollock c57:41). Abstract paintings may have historical value as recognisable instances – or relics – of a

particular line of visual experimentation, but it doesn't make sense to pretend that they are worthy of extended intellectual exegesis (see the sections on Gerhard Richter 30:24 & 49:00).

Where does all this take us ? We're establishing the principles whereby one is able to judge the worth – in terms of authentic content – of contemporary art. And these principles have little or nothing to do with classical academic technique, or aesthetic (meaning 'sensual') representations of beauty. Contemporary art is about conjuring up, using artworks, frames of mind which cannot be accessed any other way: it is about using presentational objects (sculptures, paintings, installations and so on) to present to the viewer unusual and revelatory narratives, which can then be experienced vicariously as recreational events. As was said before, the more an art object offers you an entry point to a fascinating vicarious world, the better the art.

Why isn't this simple perspective on contemporary art more widely understood ? Partly because many people are so locked into the idea of artworks being standalone aesthetic objects that they can't think of them in any other way; so if an artwork is not obviously beautiful by classical standards, it may well not be a 'proper' work of art at all (see Alexander Nemerov on Koons c50:47). Viewing contemporary artworks as subtle forms of theatre requires a certain ability to enjoy sharing other people's frames of mind.



**Alexander Nemerov examining a Koons**

Our conception of artworks as items in a kind of narrative theatre, and as an invitation to explore very distinctive takes on life, is certainly complicated by the fact that many artists might themselves dispute this characterisation. They might want to see themselves as members of a classical tradition producing standalone objects that ought to be judged by classical standards – give or take a few concessions to modernity – but this lack of insight into their own endeavours only succeeds in adding a peculiar and fascinating dimension to the whole experience. Genuine 'lack of self-awareness' can invest creative work with a depth and mystery that far exceeds anything cynical market-manipulation can achieve, which is why Warhol and Beuys and Koons and Gilbert and George have a cogency to their achievements – perhaps despite themselves – that others like Hirst and Emin and Creed can only marvel at.

But having established principles by which we can assess contemporary art objectively – and in so doing bypassing the sense of uncertainty that fuels the idea that the contemporary art market is an absurdist charade – we still have to acknowledge another somewhat perplexing possibility which the film reveals in passing. And this is the idea that because contemporary art is so widely misunderstood by all concerned – as well as being inherently bohemian and weird - it is always going to have a sense of playful decadence about it, with people competing for apparently meaningless objects just for the entertaining hell of it. So what if the thing in my lounge is a bizarre pile of junk, we outbid guys in Japan and Russia, and the catalogue assures me it's 'profound'. Who cares if the monstrous splotch and swirl painting over the fireplace in my chateau would be better placed in a kids' nursery; it's worth tens of millions, and it makes all my educated friends jealous. And so on. It may well be that people really don't care that much about the real 'art of art'; they just want to spend their moola extravagantly in public; and if a successful bid creates a frisson of shock and bewilderment among the chattering hordes, so much the better. Of course you might also need to be able to recognise what's fashionable and desirable, but there's always someone at Sotheby's to help you with that.

Where does this leave us ? Well, 'The Price of Everything' certainly gives us a mildly diverting look at the goings-on at the very top end of the food chain, even if it fails to present us with any decisive insights. So we never come close to learning the real value of art. The auctioneer Simon de Pury reminds us (c53:15) that much of the fashionable desirability of artworks is down to a matter of ever-changing taste, and that the only way cultural artefacts will survive is for them to have commercial worth (c1:45). Both ideas may be true in their way, though this doesn't tell us anything about the art, only about the people who buy it. But looking ahead – and things being what they are with the way the rich spend their money – we can be reasonably confident in the belief that, no matter how many bubbles and crashes there are to come, and no matter how shallow the appreciation of art itself remains, the art market – as an arena for conspicuous acquisition – is always going to be there. After all, the rich are always going to need to decorate their properties with spectacular trophies.

More on this conception of art:

<https://ulondon.academia.edu/JakobZaaiman>

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[https://www.mrqe.com/movie\\_reviews/the-price-of-everything-m100122677](https://www.mrqe.com/movie_reviews/the-price-of-everything-m100122677)