



*Frieze, 2015*  
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I went to Frieze this year. I don't think Frieze is a good place for artists to go. I work full time for a painter, making drawings and paintings taken from photographic references that he creates. He went on opening day, then gave me his VIP Card, so two of my coworkers and I went that Saturday. A Frieze VIP card gives the holder and one guest free ferry rides to the fair, free admission, and access to a special VIP lounge. We split the cost of one ferry ride three ways, claimed our two free rides, and we were on our way.

To get inside the fair, we did the classic movie theater trick: two people enter with the pass, one stays inside and one comes back out, and then he and the third person enter again. This trick also worked at the VIP lounge. The price of a full-priced general admission ticket is normally \$45. Paradoxically, I felt like you get too much art to see for your money – Frieze is a better fair than the Armory Show, but it still feels sprawling.

While writing this, I went to a lecture by Isabelle Graw<sup>1</sup>. She talks about how we define painting, and how the state of painting has changed. The economic heights of the current art market are mostly backed by painting, for practical reasons (storage), but also, according to Graw, because of what painting, as opposed to all other mediums, represents in art.

A painting is an indexical link to the “person” of the artist - their “self” is supposedly captured by the object, the painting. This can happen through the individual labor of the artist (Marx said value was just “labor in its congealed state”), or through transference of the concept, as in the work of Warhol or Wade Guyton – the idea is translated through assistants (like me) or machines, but the work still has the “latent sense of the artist”, as she calls it. Graw argues that while this can be true of other mediums, in painting it is backed up by endless writing, criticism and historical opinion, meaning that painting embodies this concept the most of any medium. This is why painting has become the most common and desirable identifier of the thing we call “art”.

If this is true, it certainly seems that some paintings have more of a sense of the artist than others. It also seems to me that if you see too many “markers of individuality” in one place, the paintings become stripped of that “sense of the artist” that was supposed to make them interesting in the first place. I don’t think anyone is really making the argument that art fairs are about art, but if anyone is then this is a good academic reasoning for why art fairs are about the culture around art, rather than the artwork itself. Most of the work shown is painting, and the Walmartness of the setting robs painting of its intrinsic value.

With this sense of the artist gone, what remains incredibly visible is a painting’s ability to represent value, to exist as an investment commodity. To be a painter, I think it is necessary to see non-economic value in a painting. Maybe that’s wishful thinking, but I do believe that a majority of artists believe in and practice artmaking for reasons that extend beyond economics, at least at the beginning. I found seeing a sea of paintings reduced to signifiers of finance, rather than art, depressing. This was reinforced by the VIP lounge.

1: Isabelle Graw, “The Economy of Painting - Notes on the Vitality of a Success-Medium” at the Jewish Museum



The VIP lounge has an indoor and outdoor section. The indoor section has a bar, with up-scale bar food available as well. Beers were \$12, so we decided to ball out on some mixed drinks. The Bloody Marys were \$15, which I followed with an \$18 white wine. We stole a little cheese from an unattended cheese plate, and it was delicious. The VIP lounge sat directly next to the public food and drink area, which by the time we checked it out had less people, more seating, better priced drinks and Roberta's pizza. The food throughout the entire fair is overpriced, but it seems even more overpriced in the VIP lounge.

The architecture felt pointlessly oppressive. The space is barely divided from the public spaces at the fair, it's not about actually separating or isolating VIPs, it's about letting everyone know they're separated. The entire fair is built raised 2-3 feet above the grass, and the VIP section faces Manhattan, albeit an ironically dismal view of (presumably) a storage facility. There is the river, a public walkway, and then the guarded VIP area, meaning that as the public strolls around the island, they have to pass a slightly elevated space for special (rich) people. They have to see people drinking expensive wines and eating expensive cheeses, and know they're not as good as them. Conversely, the people eating the cheeses need to see commoners walking by, and know that they are better than them. Most comically, there are security guards at the entrance, which is only three stairs. Without the guard, all that stands between incredible luxury and the rest of New York City's public is three planks of poplar. These VIPs are the people who can afford to buy contemporary art.

It seems, in order to solely be an artist while living a reasonably nice life, an artist needs to sell work. Maybe this isn't true, or maybe this is a purely American concept, but I live in New York, a purely American city, and want to remain here, so to some extent I have to find my way within those parameters. The business side of art needs to exist for artists to be able to support themselves. But the ramifications of this business side, the insane resale prices, the gimmicky pop museum shows, the idea that some of the people buying paintings are the same ones buying \$99,000,000 apartments that they don't even live in – all of that is depressing, and is encapsulated by art fairs. Too much time at an art fair, or in the business of art, could make you, depending on your politics, too leftist to make art. Too conceptual, too anti-capitalist, to produce art objects, which, despite all of their problems, still have something about them that I love.



At the end of the lecture, someone asks Graw about her use of Marxist labor in her analysis. The audience member argues that Marx was talking about socially useful labor, not art. Graw counters that Marx also describes non-productive labor, and that, furthermore, the artist does not occupy the same role as the underpaid proletariat worker, but, unfortunately, closer to that of the bourgeoisie. The audience member disagrees, saying they can be proletariat (although ceding that the artist owns their own means of production), citing David Hammons selling snowballs on the street as evidence of artistic proletariat. “No... No!” – Graw becomes more adamant in her conviction. Once an action enters the field of art, it (and thus its creator, whose self is contained by the work) leaves the field of productive labor and enters the sphere of the bourgeoisie. David Hammons selling snowballs on the street is not the same as someone selling things on the street every day because they have to. A performance that mimics proletariat necessity is still the work of an outsider looking in.

She’s right. As hideous as I may have found Frieze in the moment, I was in the VIP section. I saw myself as an undercover agent, but the reality of being bourgeoisie, or at the very least complicit in their actions, is the more disturbing reality. I don’t think art fairs are good places for artists to go.

