



Robert Longo at
Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery,
London

The Battle for Good Artists

Each generation, each epoch chooses its own art. Five or six names represent the Renaissance, even though the highly valued works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were produced internationally, in Holland, in Germany, and in Italy. The artists who were elevated to aristocratic rank early on and in several countries were almost exclusively Italian. During the Baroque era, it was Peter Paul Rubens and Lorenzo Bernini, both of them ennobled and moreover entrusted with ambassadorial duties, who supplied the greatest royal houses with their works or built *St. Peter's* Basilica, the most prestigious church in Europe. Those artists widely hoped that the flourishing of the arts would herald an era of peace. More recently, in the 20th Century, there were similarly just a few names – again and again Pablo Picasso, next to him Henri Matisse, the leading proponents of avant-garde ideas, and a few representatives of American and British Pop Art – who mesmerized the West and eventually the East. **And what have we today? A new order, more justice, or chaos? Continuing globalization, or is it a glocalization, and as such not particularly new?** Are we well served by lists of the 100 “greatest” living artists and by references to the enormous revenue from works by an unchanging roster of great historical artists like Picasso, Andy Warhol, or Claude Monet? Consider Félix González-Torres, who died of Aids in 1996, a few months before his fortieth birthday. One of his ideas consisted in distributing candy in the exhibition space and piling up nearby stacks of posters, free for the taking, beneath light bulbs that dangled from wired cords suspended from the ceiling. His art made participation a political act. It took a few years after his death for his prices to rise above the million dollar mark. When his estate finally moved to *David Zwirner's* New York gallery in 2017, *Andrea Rosen*, who had championed his work for many years, closed her own gallery. **Ever since then, the battle for representation of the best has been in full force, even though the names of today's best are still widely unknown.** Week by week, at least once a month, we learn about such takeovers. The Covid-19 pandemic does not change this. There is a quest, now as ever, for desirable assets, attractive estates. Thus the heirs of John Chamberlain, Eduardo Chillida, Günther Förg and Sophie Taeuber-Arp have found a new gallery in *Hauser & Wirth*. Similarly, renowned young artists will sometimes leave a long-accustomed home for a new one. Dana Schutz, a painter who translates motifs from Edvard Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or Max Beckmann into an almost shriekingly expressive surrealism, has moved to *David Zwirner*. Nicole Eisenman, like Schutz a cynical and critical artist, though her paintings are clearly articulated and, by comparison, fairytale-like in their effects, has been selling since last year through *Hauser & Wirth*. George Condo, a star by now, has also been represented by *Hauser & Wirth* since 2019.

Such moves have the double effect of not only raising prices but providing a new impetus. **The new galleries upgrade their archives, commit themselves as much as ever to a high turnover, produce first-rate exhibitions, some of them in museums, and ensure lasting international fame for their artists through publications and marketing efforts.** Given the very large number of artists working today who have graduated from art academies with a diploma, such increased investment is not a self-evident option. Galleries that fall short are forced into an ambivalent situation. If their inventory is not well stocked, if they do not receive new products, it is hardly worth their while to continue to promote any particular name. We know from sociology and psychology how ambitious artists can be. **Analogously to the attainment of wealth combined with aristocratic privilege in previous centuries, adoption by an especially great gallery means more to a contemporary artist than fame and money. It means being inducted into an illustrious family whose character is defined by the cultivated taste of the patron.** The *Pace Gallery* in New York still boasts the largest number of artists with 104 names on its list. Its success reaches back almost half a century to the 1970s. Yet despite its huge new building in Chelsea, New York, it is no longer the leader of the art scene. *Larry Gagosian*, with no less than eighteen locations around the world (albeit four of his galleries have temporarily closed due to the pandemic and to declines in sales), lists 85 artists who have long been recognized as particularly well-established. *David Zwirner* with 72 listings follows next. Because of a merger with *Gavin Brown*, *Barbara Gladstone* now also represents 72 artists. *Thaddaeus Ropac* follows with 67, and the same high number is listed by *Sprüth Magers*. **But the numbers don't indicate who the truly good names are.** We plan to address this question in our next issue.



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