



From Bushwick to the Upper East Side

New York and The Ladder of Success in the Art Market



Alejandro Leyva, Como un Angel, 2012



This is the story of how a group of artists have climbed the ladder of success from a post-industrial site in Bushwick, to the poshest spot in the Upper East Side: the Waterfall Mansion. It is a modern tale, but also a reality for a number of artists.

This is just one of the fresh stories 100% made in New York. An example of how this country still is indeed the land of opportunity. The ladder of success in the art market had an early step for our protagonists in Call for Bushwick. What is Call for Bushwick? It is an international call for artists organized during Bushwick Open Studios. The award has been able to benefit from strong selection panels, and has offered three days group shows for its

winner on the two consecutive editions held to the date. That way, the international award Call for Bushwick has been used as a database for the artist selected for the Summer Art Festival 2014.

The Summer Art Festival 2014 consists of a group show of 72 artists and more than 150 art works. It is a show with a retail value of more than 5 million dollars, able to include works of Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik, Takashi Murakami, Jessica Stockholder, and Richard Meier, but also some of the winners and candidates of the past edition of Call for Bushwick, such as winners of 2013 edition (Seunghwui Koo, and Esmeralda Kosmatopoulos), of 2014 one (Robin Antar, Heather Merckle, Virginie Sommet, and Eunkyung Lee) as well as the candidates Pablo Carpio and Javier Infantes.

These artists are experiencing in their own flesh the immense possibilities of New York City and the potential for growth and exposure that a post-industrial site in Bushwick can provide. It reminds me what Pablo Picasso famously told to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in the fifties: “In order for paintings to be sold at high prices, they must first have been sold very cheaply”.

Why does a call for artists propel a group of artists this way? What’s the rationale behind the success in the arts? This is a question worth asking.

Succeeding in the arts has been for long surrounded by mysterious causes. The “Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood” has been cried stentoreously in studios and academies since art became a profession. Take a genius like Paul Cézanne. He moved to Paris to pursue a career in the arts in 1861. His masterpieces were rejected innumerable times by the Salon de Paris, the art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. While persevering, he underwent scorn and ridicule in the few exhibitions he won along with his Impressionist friends, until curator Ambroise Vollard gave him his first solo exhibition in 1895. Camille Pissarro marveled at his former student’s work and described the show and its circumstance in a letter to his son: “There are some exquisite things, still-lives of irreproachable perfection, others much worked on and yet left unfinished, and, even more beautiful than the rest, some landscapes, some nudes, some unfinished heads which are, however, truly imposing and so artistic, so subtle... Why? Because sensation is there”. And more: “You wouldn’t believe how difficult it is for me to make certain collectors, who are friends of the impressionists, understand how precious Cézanne’s qualities are. I suppose centuries will pass before these are appreciated”.

Public, critics and dealers didn’t understand Cézanne at that time, but the Impressionists understood, and fought to buy admirable paintings at about 400 modest francs each. Renoir, Degas, Monet and Pissarro left the exhibition with pictures worth 400 francs that four years later were valued over 4,000 francs. Cézanne’s paintings were worth over 25,000 francs fifteen years later, and five hundred thousand French francs in 1925.

This phenomenon has been observed repeatedly. Remind the careers of Jackson Pollock, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Richard Serra just to mention a few examples. Although the

phenomenon could appear as a sudden eclosion, an unstoppable breakthrough of well deserved recognition, it's in reality a process, a proper ladder of success. This process has been detailed by a British art historian and former director of the Tate Gallery in a worthwhile reading titled, *The Conditions of Success*. Sir Alan Bowness states that there is a clear and regular progression by which important artists become generally recognized. Every successful artist has gone through four successive stages in climbing the ladder.

The first step is peer recognition. He understands that the very first people to perceive an important artist are necessarily other artists of his own generation.

Secondly the artist must receive recognition from critics whose endeavour is explaining the artist's features and perhaps innovations to a wider public.

Then as a third step comes the attention of the dealers and finally the attention and recognition of the general public which makes the artist irrevocably successful. This process has received considerable support although in the contemporary art market the second and third steps have been disputed. Second and third steps are nowadays arguably inverted. Since the volume of the contemporary art is so big and the number of art critics is so low, art shows have become a critical element in attracting the attention of critics.

Art acquires its market value because it has cultural worth, and the culture, of course, can only embrace something it has good access to. The art needs to be seen before it can be proclaimed excellent. The reason galleries and curators need to exist is to allow the art to be accessible by the most powerful player in the art game: the public.

If Picasso's cubist period sat hidden in a brothel of Avignon the pictures would mean very little. They only started to matter once there could be a broader talk about them. In the same vein, art that moves without friction straight from the studio to the middleman's warehouse then onto the collector's wall is art that is never given the chance to matter.

Peter Hort, the conspicuous collector and founder of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation, recently draw the circuits of the art world pipeline of notoriety. The major contemporary art museums, he said, like the MoMa, the Whitney or the Reina Sofía pick their shows from almost the same group of galleries. Where do these galleries pick their artists? David Zwirner, Gagosian, Metro Pictures select their artists from what have been called "mid-career" galleries in Chelsea, Upper and Lower East Side. This last group of galleries find their artists in emerging galleries from Brooklyn and the Lower East Side.

The ladder of success for artists from the four corners of the world often starts in a post industrial site of Bushwick or some other Brooklyn district undergoing a gentrification process. Festivals, fairs, and calls for artists are of the utmost importance to make a step into the world capital of the arts.

The ladder of success is not, as I've tried to demonstrate, such an arcane for the art market. It has a regular structure that can be observed and traced. The instructions to climb it however don't look so obvious. Discipline, opportunity, compass, and good company may be

required. In any case, and quoting Julio Cortazar’s *Instructions on how to climb a staircase*, let me suggest that “one commences by raising that portion of the body situated at the below right”.

For more information:

www.callforbushwick.com

http://issuu.com/andy.mode/docs/saf2014_book_-_7th_draft

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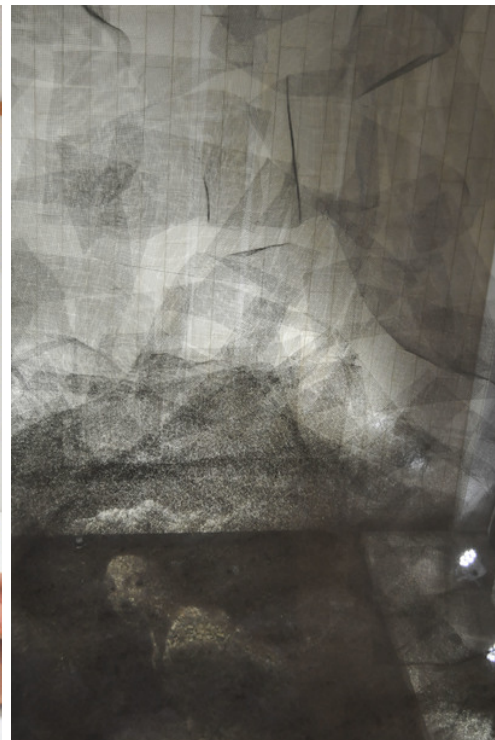
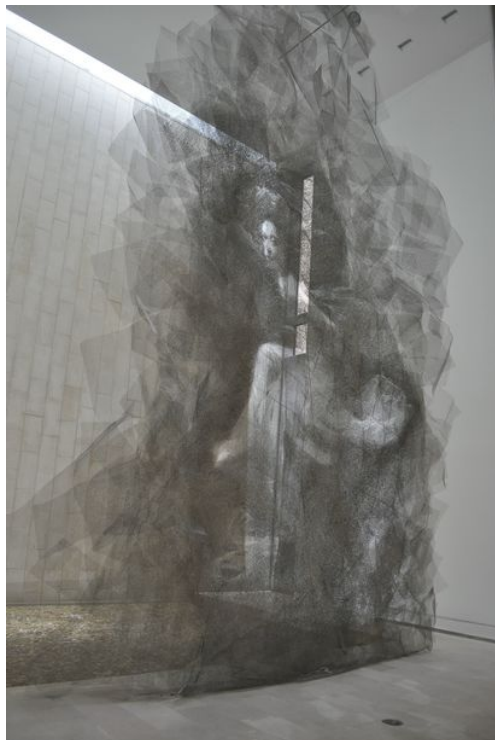
1. Seungmo Park, *Maya 942*, 2014, stainless steel, wire mesh, L155 x W18 x H276 in
2. The Summer Art Festival 2014, New York, swimmer
3. Seungmo Park, *Maya 942*, 2014, stainless steel, wire mesh, L155 x W18 x H276 in
4. Sculpture carved in stone by Robin Antar
5. Heather Merckle, *All the things that you said*, 2014, liquid graphite, conte crayon, charcoal on canvas
6. Koo Seunghwui, *Narcissism*, 2012, acrylic on resin, mirror

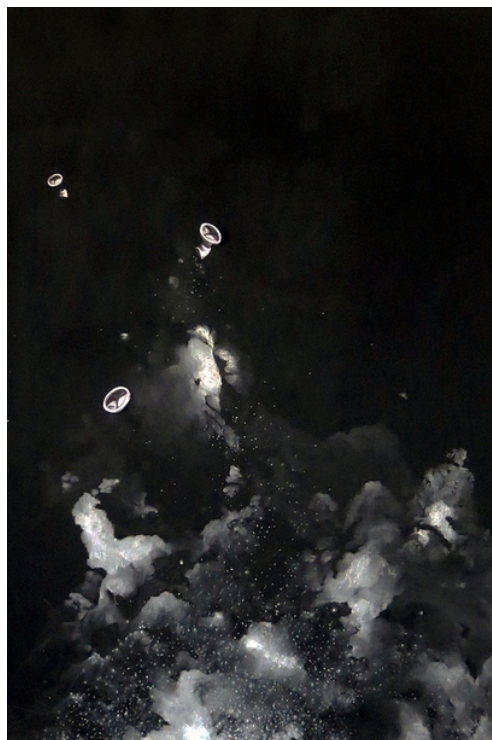


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September 02, 2014

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