5 Booms and busts: end of season thought

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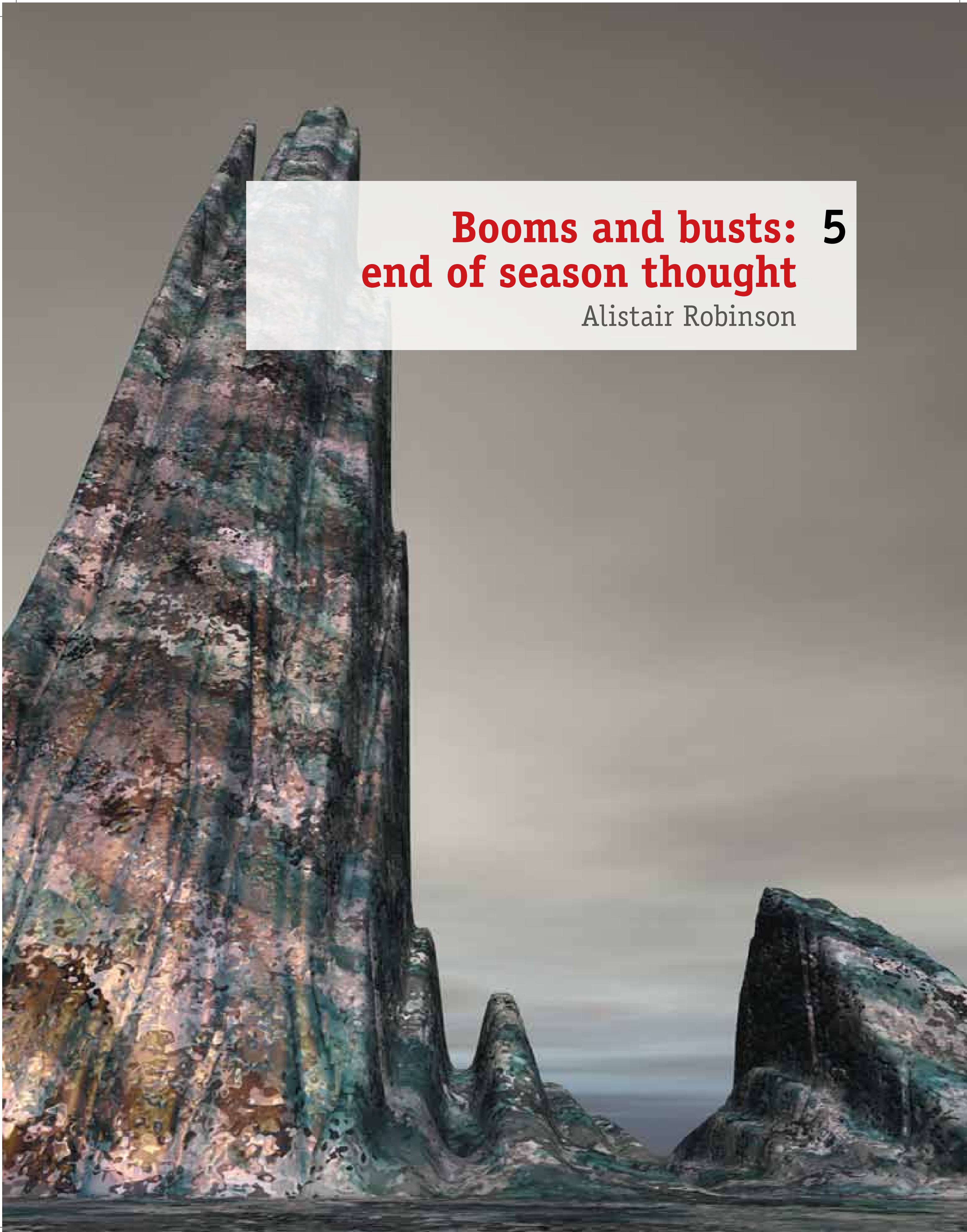

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> The day will come when corporations will cease to consider themselves greater than the country which created them. (William Jennings Bryan, 1896)[1]
>
> Bazaar – Grand Sale of ideas – end of season thoughts – Genuine bargains – Unheard of prices. (Francis Picabia, 1919)[2]

Imagining the workings of the financial markets, or their failure to work, might be thought to necessitate conceptualising their extreme states and contrasting fortunes, even how their very basis leads from 'boom' to 'bust' and back again. The popular experience of the markets is, at present, arguably enthralled by this image of cycles of boom and bust, and the half-truth it presents. The expectation or anticipation of 'extreme' states – which are seemingly unstoppable or akin to natural events – is simply accepted, and acceptable. Both parts of that equation have been put under pressure and queried by artists in quite unexpected ways.

There is a long historical pedigree to alternative ways of picturing the market as the product of collective madness rather than individual economic rationality, whose booms and busts are part of normal business rather than unforeseeable irruptions, as it girates between extremes rather than tending towards equilibrium. The trope of finance as a dizzying fairground ride can be found, for example, in *Des waerelds oen en doolen, is maar een mallemoolen* ('The actions and designs of the world go round as if in a mill') from *Het groote Tafereel der Dwaasheid* ('The Great Mirror of Folly'), produced in the wake of the South Sea Bubble of 1720 (Figure 1). Likewise in William Hogarth's *Emblematical Print on the South Sea Scheme* social types from contemporary London society ride a merry-go-round, conjuring up the idea of finance as a devilish wheel of fortune (Figure 2). The women crowding the rickety balcony in the background suggest traditional fears about the association between irrationality and femininity in general, as well as particular anxieties about the way that the unregulated nature of the stock market allowed Jews, dissenters and women to participate without regulation in the public sphere.[3]

These satirical prints on the South Sea Bubble rely on an allegorical or emblematic approach to representation, echoing in their form the idea that finance itself worked through the exchange of imaginary, fantastical beings for more tangible and 'real' things. In Hogarth's allegorical vision of finance, for instance, trade is caught napping while the devil dispatches pieces of the body of a prostrate Fortune to a frenzied crowd. The caption on the monument compares the effects of the South Sea crash to the Great Fire of London with both leading to 'the destruction of the City', begging the question of whether financial panics are man-made or a natural disaster.

How to conceive of the violent mechanisms of the market remained as much a problem – of both aesthetics and politics – in the wake of the 2008 crisis as it did in the aftermath of the South Sea Bubble in 1720. Economists have since the beginning of their discipline described and conceptualised distinct phases of speculation, often in terms of 'cycles' or

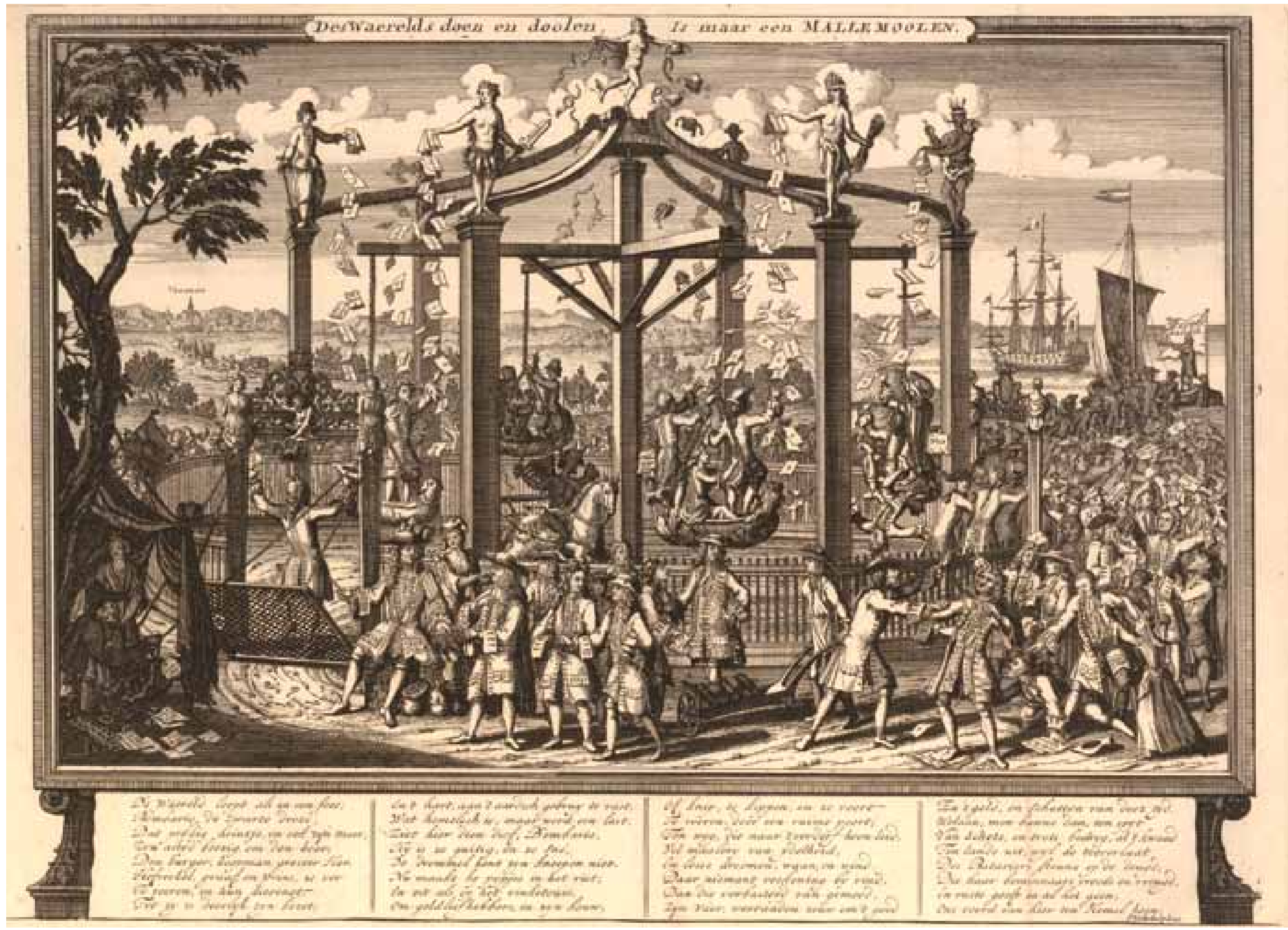


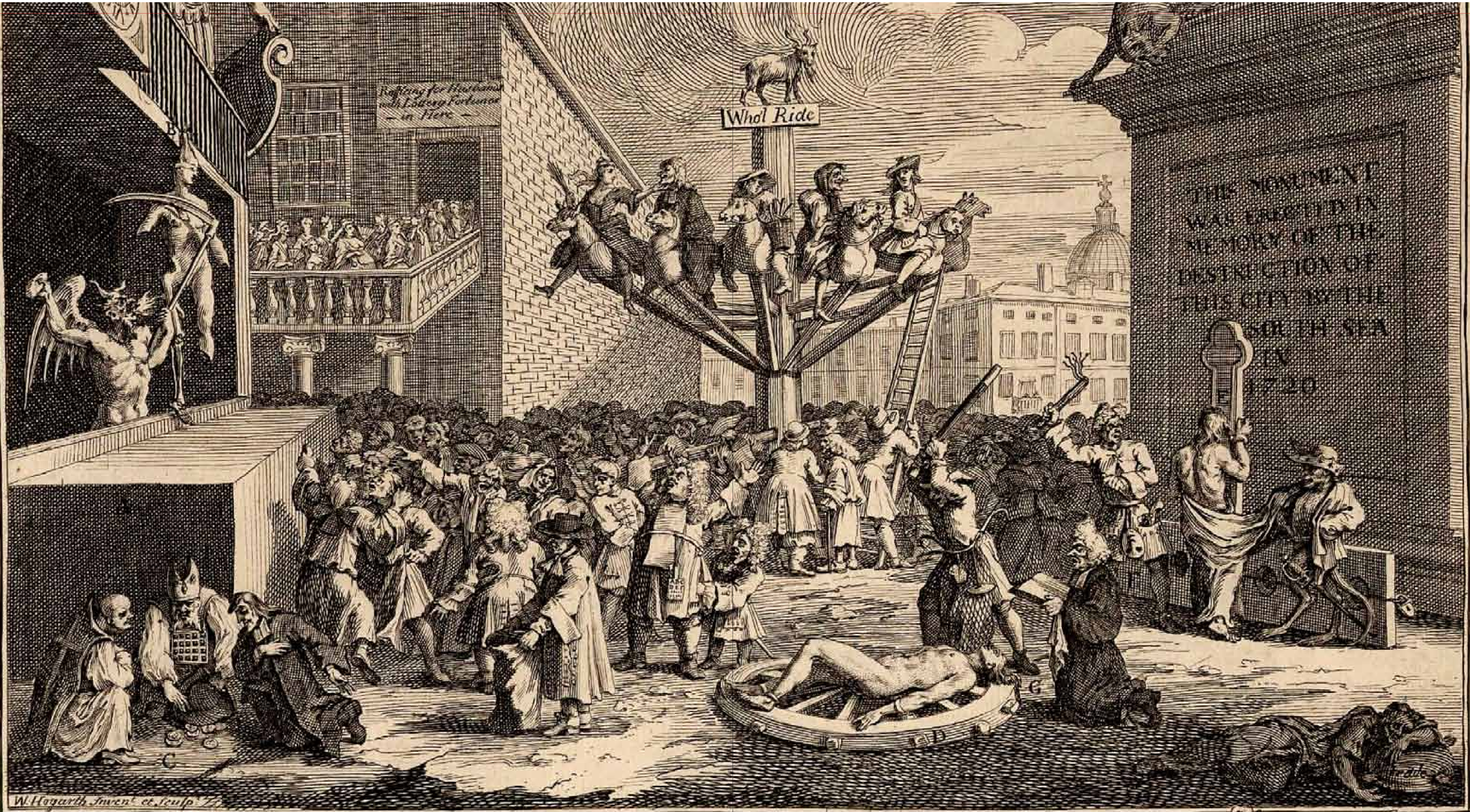
Figure 1

Des waerelds oen en doolen, is maar een mallemoolen ('The actions and designs of the world go round as if in a mill') from *Het groote Tafereel der Dwaasheid* ('The Great Mirror of Folly') (Amsterdam, 1720).

Figure 2

William Hogarth, *An Emblematic Print on the South Sea* (1721).

SEE FOLLOWING SPREAD ALSO



See here y^e^ Causes why in London,
So many Men are made, & undone,
That Arts, & honest Trading drop,
To Swarm about y^e^ Devils Shop, (A)
Who Cuts out (B) Fortunes Golden Haunches

Trapping their Souls with Lotts & Chances,
Shareing 'em from Blue Garters down
To all Blue Aprons in the Town.
Here all Religions flock together,
Like Tame & Wild Fowl of a Feather,

Leaving their strife Religious bustle,
Kneel down to play at pitch & Hussle; (C)
Thus when the Sheepherds are at play,
Their flocks must surely go Astray;
The woeful Cause y^t^ in these Times,

(E) Honour, & (D) honesty, are Crimes,
That publickly are punish'd by
(G) Self Interest, and (F) Vilany;
So much for Monys magick power;
Guess at the Rest you find out more:

Printed for John Bowles at N.^o^ 13, in Cornhill

'waves'. Such terms draw on either natural or mechanical imagery for their metaphorical power (and have the added bonus of their associations of imperial rise and decline).[4] There is, though, little consensus as to how 'cycles' can be anticipated, or how long or regular 'cycles' should be. The ways in which they have been represented both by financial professionals and in visual culture, draw on figurative imagery that can be examined critically. Even the idea of a 'cycle' that recurs encompasses everything from that identified by Joseph Kitchin (over three to four years) to the 'long waves' of investment (over half-centuries) characterised by Nicolai Kondratiev.[5] The latter's idea of a 'boom', then, lies in the total consequences of an entire technological revolution, such as that initiated by steam power and rail, with the 'bubble' contrasted as a short-term effect. The parameters of market activity are not obvious, but are always seen in relation to both the historical and political vantage point we imagine we occupy.

Furthermore, the terms of representation available are not solely limited to the dramatic extremes of 'boom' and 'bust' – though these clearly have some purchase with regards to the financial crisis of 2008 to the present.[6] The terms are based on a simple binary model, and plot a simplistic dramatic arc. Yet such terms have their uses: they are lodged in the popular imagination, are the mainstay of journalists' terms of description, and have been adapted by economists in innumerable ways. One recent text, for example, refigures waves of investment as 'irruptions', with the subsequent years being an 'ascent' or a 'frenzy', eventually becoming a 'mature' market where values are stable and secure.[7] The combination of imagery from natural processes ('irruptions') and from crowd behaviour ('frenzy') is typical, yet the two are irreconcilable. Placing them as adjacent elides the two registers, implicitly presenting irrational behaviours as being unstoppable forces of nature or acts of God. Such frameworks of understanding, or misunderstanding, have provided considerable scope for artists to intervene. After all, if the majority of mainstream economists (and political figures) in the Anglo-American world were unable to even conceive of the years immediately prior to 2008 as a 'boom', the discipline's claim to knowledge is insecure. By definition there are alternative ways of imagining and showing how we are all implicated in the workings of finance.

Many of the ways in which the recent financial crisis has been represented by artists are surprising. The artists might initially seem to concur with neo-classical economists' own terms and values, rather than offer radical critiques or hostile counter-claims. They avoid outright protest, or often even any direct commentary. We might say that the limits of discourse in our own time are such that to be heard at all outside of the specialist art market, one must occupy a kind of *terra cognita*. We might also say that many artists of note have therefore recognised that in order to act in the financial markets one must necessarily have internalised a set of hypotheses and assumptions about credit, about the predictability of the future, and the nature of our financial relationships. Their areas of contestation *are* these assumptions. I will examine three case studies of how individual

artists have approached these problems. In each instance, the dominant terms by which discourse is conducted are placed under pressure, by being re-presented, re-iterated and re-enacted respectively.[8] (The latter two terms are salient: in recent years, the idea of the artist as a 'semionaut' has been supplanted by one in which artists act out, or re-enact situations and scenarios as kinds of social experiments. As here, these social experiments are also ones in popular finance.)

The background to the practices in each of the three artists' bodies of work has been the new 'social contract' that has existed since 2008 between the state, the citizen-taxpayer, and the financial system in both the UK and United States. There is no shortage of literature about such a complex and vast topic, though contemporary artists have some surprising advantages in being able to address it. In contrast to their predecessors, the artists here are not limited to *pictorial* representations, but can recreate or restage some of the market's own processes and operations by working with 'found' material from the world at large. Artists are able to create performative versions of how modern finance works, rather than merely describing it. In working between visual and verbal languages, they have been able to test our conventionalised figures of speech, often by literalising them – by translating verbal coinages that are imagistic into visual images themselves. By placing pressure upon the store of metaphors that have become the stock in trade of journalists describing the financial crisis since 2008, the artists allow us to identify their limits and inadequacies.

One example of the latter way of working is David Cornford and Matthew Cross's work *The Lost Horizon*. Cornford & Cross's modus operandi might, roughly speaking, be described as feeding the hand that bites them. To create *The Lost Horizon* they worked with American Express, who provided *Financial Times* Stock Exchange data, and with the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) to find ways to interpret it for both 'lay' audiences and LSE staff and students. Accordingly, the work presents a graphic representation of real statistics, with each day giving rise to a new image. The 'cycle' that we encounter in the work is that of a single day of trading.

Cornford & Cross began their investigation of the dominant or normative ways in which market activity is pictured by working with LSE staff to see what kinds of visual images were most familiar, and could be immediately and readily interpreted. The overwhelming consensus was that the simplest, most universally comprehensible images were graphic ones, with line graphs proving most immediately graspable. Adapting this type of image, and working with the grain of preferences became their starting point to trying to rethink how our financial markets are imagined.

The Lost Horizon adapts the familiar graphs featured in newspapers and other media by drawing into play the metaphors associated with market highs and lows. The artists observe that the workings of high finance have been habitually described as almost

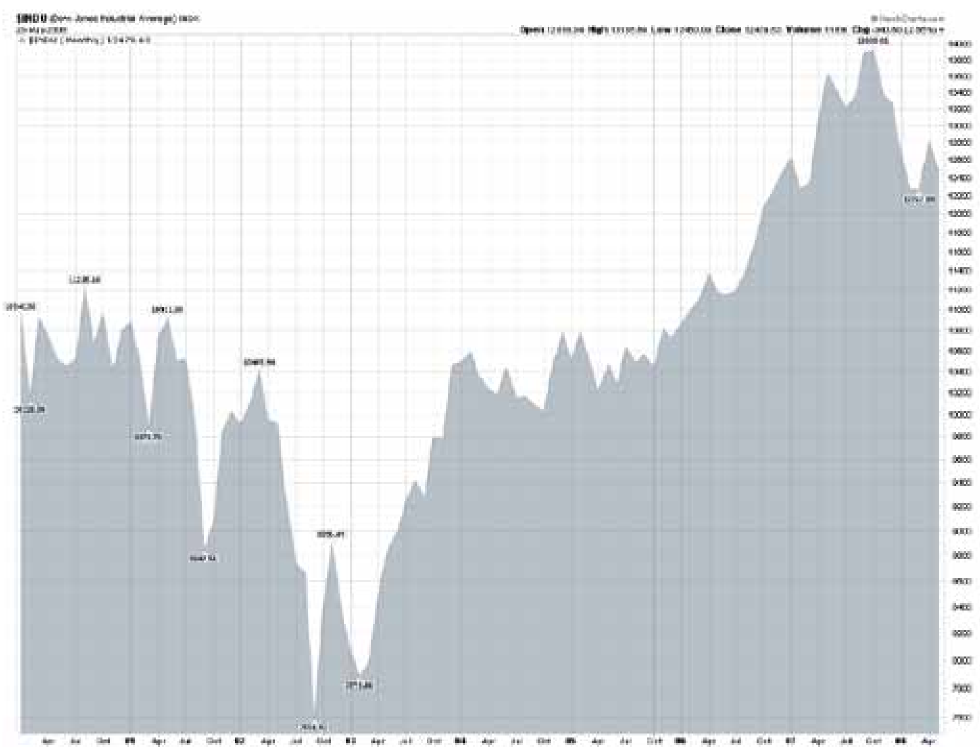


Figure 3

Matthew Cornford & David Cross, *The Lost Horizon* (detail) (2003). Computer-generated image: screensaver generated from financial data. First realised at the London School of Economics.

Courtesy the artists.

Figure 4

Dow Jones Industrial Average, 2000–2008: financial market graph.

Courtesy Stock Charts, New York.

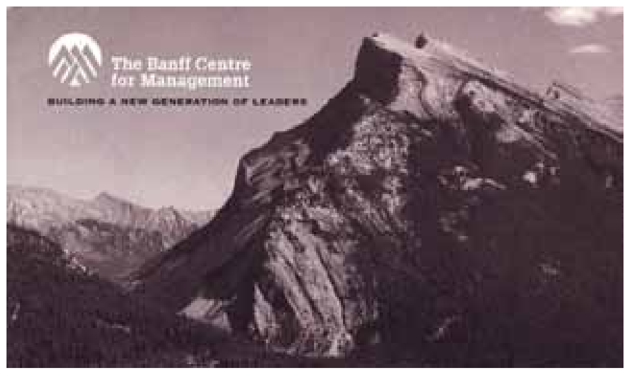
sublime in their ability to defy the comprehension of ordinary educated citizens. In this ideological model, financial literacy is, by definition, restricted to an elite, whose vested interests happen to coincide fully with their abilities to comprehend the market's workings. By contrast *The Lost Horizon* aims to provide even the most financially illiterate person with a guide to the financial world's operations on any particular day. It makes tangible – paradoxically, through virtual forms – all of the movements of the market over the last recent day's trading. Cornford & Cross deliberately take the dominant images or terms of reference to describe the market in order to reveal them as ideologically loaded constructions. The artists note that their images and terms of description are taken directly from the field: 'the language and imagery of business is rich with metaphoric references to mountain landscapes … the concepts of risk and security in commerce are often visualised in images of climbers scaling the heights of an unspoilt wilderness'.[9] Each rise and fall is represented as a part of a landscape that pushes and pulls at the earth, with market movements becoming monstrous forces being unleashed from under the earth's crust.[10]

The Lost Horizon, in other words, transforms FTSE statistics into landscape imagery, and in particular into jagged mountain ranges that offer both a sense of threat or danger, and a sense of hope that these peaks can be safely conquered. One part of their research entailed discovering how information and ideas are communicated between traders – their group behaviour. The artists observe that the markets are mostly observed from the safety and isolation of a computer screen, but as each trader uses real-time software, any amendment in their peers' behaviour is instantly transmitted to all the other participants. At the moment one or more traders betray merely an inkling of fear, or of hope through their actions, that has repercussions worldwide, despite the apparent abstraction of their actions.

The artists also develop their works so that they reshape the context out of which they are created. The artists act as participant-observers in the financial landscapes they depict, in a quasi-ethnographic fashion. As traders' worlds are imagined through screens, so *The Lost Horizon* was created on and for computer screens. Traders exchange data, never encountering physical commodities or tangible forms of currencies. No physical manifestation of capital is ever seen. Accordingly the artists employed CGI software ordinarily used in cinema or computer gaming to visualise fantasy landscapes (or, as here, landscapes of fantasy). The artists argue that screens act as *both* windows onto 'virtual' space and a means of immediate access to data from across the world. They are both escapist and the most advanced form of global data-capture network. They 'might equally represent a point of entry into or exit from the system: the screen is an ambiguous threshold between lived experience and information space'.[11]

Cornford & Cross's means of presentation equally draws on the context that a work is created from, in this case both the LSE and markets' own self-representations. In one realisation, the work is presented in the form of monumental landscape images that deliberately resemble paintings by Caspar David Friedrich. In Friedrich's key works an onlooker surveys the entirety of the 'horizon' beneath him from an unassailable position of commanding power. We imaginatively occupy that position in *The Lost Horizon*: the stand-in spectator is absent, and we enter into their role, as a surrogate 'master of the universe' with an imagined omniscience. Furthermore, the work was installed as a screensaver throughout the LSE for a whole year, being updated daily in response to new FTSE figures. Each student and member of staff was able to immediately gauge the last day's trading, and to experience the artwork (wittingly or unwittingly), notwithstanding the irony that the screensaver is only operative when the computer itself is not. Such a situation 'corresponds to a daydream' that users can project their fantasies onto.[12] Users are invited to idly gaze at the screensaver and lose themselves within it, as though the imagined landscape could subsume them, and their imagination, wholly. As the title infers, *The Lost Horizon* reminds us that a poststructural revolution in capital has taken place: there is no external point of reference or guarantee, no ultimate ground of value.[13]

As the artists put it, their role is 'playful' in staging oppositions within a single work. It contains an elision between graphic and geological systems. Data and nature are rendered as equivalents: market 'forces' and geological 'forces' are conflated. Incompatible timescales are made commensurate. The minute-by-minute responses of traders are made akin to thousand-year movements of the earth's crust. As the artists remark, 'envisioning numerical abstractions in this way generated a landscape of alienation: a parallel world where reality [itself] was determined by abstraction'.[14] 'The market' is represented both as a distant, remote place, a mountain range entirely external to human agency. As Cornford & Cross know, those who wish to see their own (ideological) propositions 'naturalised' do so through figurative speech. Making an idea into an idiom, a common figure of speech, places it above contention. The artists' role is to reverse that process, transforming commonly held notions into 'concrete', if virtual visual imagery.



If Cornford & Cross make 'literal' the default terms of description for the market 'from within', as if they were 'embedded' journalists in a financial war zone, Simon Roberts looks at the terms that journalists themselves have coined. He queries the media's failure to represent 'market failure', while producing alarming quantities of verbiage. His work asks what is excluded from representation by attempting to re-present the *entirety* of the field of representations. Roberts's project *Credit Crunch Lexicon* combines three related forms of representation and understanding: textual, graphic and photographic. The term 'lexicon' is apposite: his work constitutes a compendium of all of the common terms that have coloured the way the Anglo-Saxon world has seen the financial crisis since 2008. Roberts believes language – whether visual and verbal – never merely conveys, but conjures into being that which is purports to describe. Like Cornford & Cross, he has undertaken a kind of 'fieldwork', albeit with his field being the news media across print, the internet and television. As with Cornford & Cross, he has found that simple line graphs are all but ubiquitous in attempts to 'explain', or rather present the idea of the financial crisis to a broad audience. They are, as Roberts describes, almost a 'meme': an idea that primes us in how to behave, and which acts like a viral contagion so that the idea becomes near-universal. As he argues, they are amongst the principal ways in which 'knowledge is used and misused. Graphs are employed as badges, as a kind of shorthand denoting what the dynamics of a situation supposedly consist of. But almost invariably the graphs distort (if not falsify) through their choice of timescale or their frame of reference'.[15] The graphs that 'rolling' news programmes feature magnify changes by presenting them on a daily or hourly basis (as Cornford & Cross also discovered). The news 'cycle' supplants the market 'cycle' as what is knowable, while reporting the process with apparent neutrality. Roberts's strategy, like that of Cornford & Cross, is one of sly defamiliarisation. Rather than presenting explicitly oppositional imagery, or presenting clear counter-arguments, Roberts merely collates what is already 'out there'.

Figure 5

South-Western Pyrennees, France (1993). Stock photograph.

Figure 6

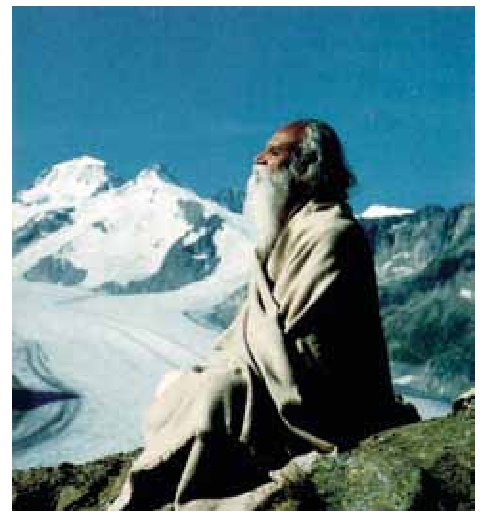
'Building a New Generation of Leaders' (1997). Brochure cover artwork. Published by Banff Centre for Management, Alberta, Canada.

Figure 7

David A. Hardy, 'Hall of the Mountain Grill' (1974). Artwork for Hawkwind album cover.

Figure 8

'Guided Meditation' (1987). Artwork for audio cassette pubished by Integral Yoga Distribution, Virginia, USA.



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PREVIOUS SPREAD

Figure 9

Simon Roberts, *Credit Crunch Lexicon* (2012). Installation in the exhibition *Let This Be a Sign* at Swiss Cottage Gallery (June 2012).

Courtesy the artist.

Figure 10

Simon Roberts, *Credit Crunch Lexicon* (detail) (2012). Installation in the exhibition *Let This Be a Sign* at Swiss Cottage Gallery (June 2012).

Courtesy the artist.

He adopts the very 'repetition, insistence, and hyperbole' that characterises mainstream discussions.[16]

In exhibition, the graphic element of *Credit Crunch Lexicon* is composed of dozens of line graphs either presented adjacent to one another, in a single line, or in a museum-style case. The sheer massing of material suggests that the world is in the middle of an unstoppable disaster. Roberts's principal intervention is to remove the labelling of the axes, so that 'understanding' of any kind is impossible. All that we see are endless numbers of downward-moving lines. Roberts argues that these graphs could, even in their original format, only ever loosely illustrate an assumption rather than forge an argument. Roberts has, on one occasion, laid out the graphs flat inside a case – again, unlabelled. If one approaches from the left side, all are reversed: bust becomes boom becomes bust. Set out in this way, the work provides a dynamic enactment of the cyclical nature of speculation, and the binary either/or format of the narrative. Such simple processes – logical inversions, the use of 'found' material and visual puns – are all ultimately indebted to Surrealism.

As outlined above, *Credit Crunch Lexicon* consists solely of quotations of other authors' words and images. A second component of the work is a vast, wall-sized sequence of written phrases similarly extracted from media coverage, and rendered in a style that makes them appear akin to signage. The 'signs' provide an endless stream of exhortations or directions that contain manifest contradictions. The work is, then, a kind of 'library' collated over a five-year period: a monumental collage of twenty-first century news about the financial crisis that distantly echoes Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades Project'. Benjamin attempted to encapsulate the movement of capital in the nineteenth century into a single volume composed only from quotations.

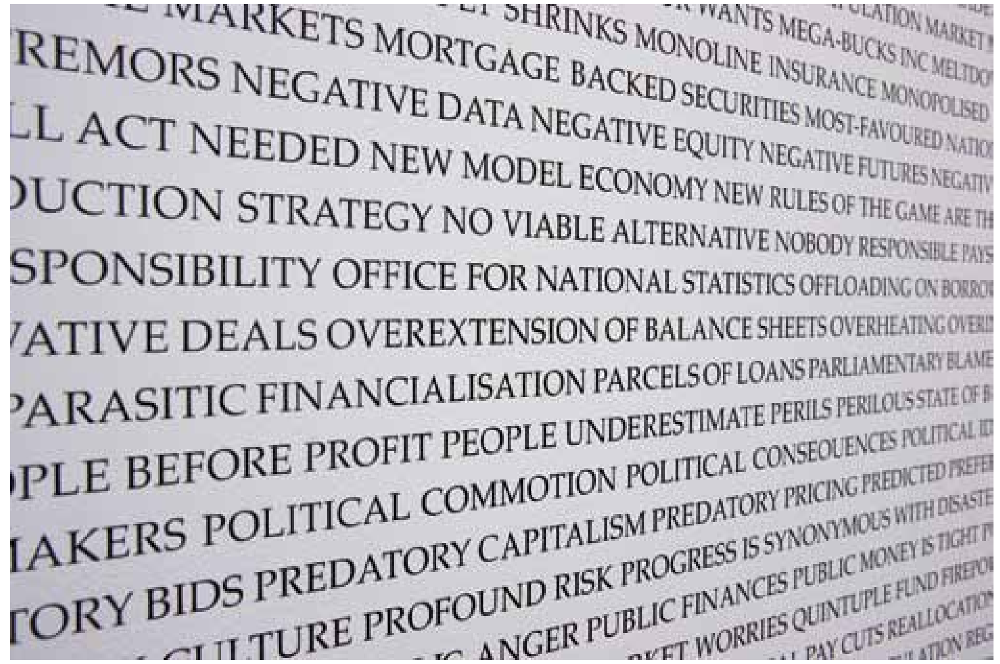

Figure 11

Simon Roberts, *Credit Crunch Lexicon* (detail) (2012). Installation in the exhibition *Let This Be a Sign* at Swiss Cottage Gallery (June 2012).

Courtesy the artist.

Like Benjamin, Roberts sees himself as an archivist of the present, and the recent past. He attempts to achieve the same end for our own century and the financial crisis that has defined it since 2008 using similar means. The effect is of hearing a radio tuned to all channels simultaneously, cacophonous and alarming: we encounter a seemingly continuous stream of sound-bites literally writ large. The volume of words is a kind of monstrous assemblage, rendering the language employed ridiculous and frightening at the same time.

Roberts remarks that while the consequences of the crisis are novel, its very predictability and that it arose from structural features of the market have been effectively suppressed. Instead, the media have merely replicated the financial markets' own impenetrable language and the opacity of their processes.[17] He argues:

> From 2008 we all had to learn a new language: a new sequence of terms that had made no impression on our consciousness before then. Coinages like 'derivatives' and 'default swaps' still remain opaque to the majority of the population but are repeated in print or online ad nauseum. The sheer strangeness of the terms lends them to being read as a kind of 'concrete poetry' in a gallery.[18]

Roberts's work extrapolates the idea that the very language already used to represent the financial crisis is artificial, or even artistic. Gobbets of language are extracted from their context and re-presented as though they were historical artefacts. *Credit Crunch Lexicon* is based on the aim of creating a sense of *ostranenie* – of distancing ourselves from our own language, and generating a sense of alienation from our existing moral universe. The terms in which Susan Buck-Morss has described Benjamin's uses of 'found' text also characterise Roberts's 'concrete poetry': 'It makes little difference … whether the "images" of the nineteenth century were pictorially or verbally represented. Whichever form they took, such images were the concrete, "small, particular moments" in which the "total historical event" was to be discovered'.[19]

Roberts's quasi-surrealist tactics invite us to register the present as a historical moment, and in doing so render tangible the historical forces that brought about another 'crisis'. This is best achieved not by coining new, vivid images, but by a kind of sedimental accretion of the opaque technical terms and wilfully clichéd images that characterise our existing linguistic field. Roberts subscribes to Stefan Collini's argument that we can only imagine each field and debate through the 'image-clusters' that they offer up.[20] To paraphrase Collini, the relationship between high finance and the entire economy is graspable through the 'range of idioms … [in which that] political argument [i]s conducted', and by grasping 'how these idioms derive from or [a]re mutations of other established intellectual standards'.[21] Roberts's role is to present the entirety of the 'image-cluster' that the media have created, to test them against 'established intellectual standards'.

Roberts also takes Collini's line that 'clichés can be revealing of what a culture takes for granted' as axiomatic.[22] The third component of *Credit Crunch Lexicon* is a 'found' photographic archive in which the images present a litany of visual clichés. We encounter photographs from the financial markets of traders and others in moments of apparent despair, rage, or frustration. Their gestures and facial expressions are often almost identical. It is as though they were playing out a finite range of roles from the theatrical repertoire, as if they are 'actors' in their field who can only 'play to type', or self-stereotype.[23] To adapt Collini's argument again, the repetition of such images provides an ironic 'reassurance that … the forces at work are few and simple, that "complexity" is a dodge created by pedants'.[24] Roberts's position is not merely that the media simplify matters into monocausal explanations. Nor is it that they simply personalise structural issues, making 'market failure' a matter of individuals' failings and closing off any possibility of wider debate or analysis. These are well established. Rather, Roberts sees that our 'image-clusters', pictorially, verbally and graphically trap us, constituting the limits of what can legitimately be said, rather than what is sayable. Again, Roberts takes Benjamin's 'Arcades Project' as exemplary, his position echoing the idea that 'the debris of mass culture [i]s the source of philosophical truth'.[25] In the last instance he believes, as Max Ernst and Picabia did before him, that we are known by the ephemera that we keep.

If Roberts has made manifest what the symbolic consequences of the 2008 crash have been, Wolfgang Weileder has perhaps been the one artist able to positively re-enact its financial consequences, albeit in microscopic form, and in negative. His work *Cashpoint* was conceived in 2008 and realised as a public installation in Australia the following year. It has yet to be realised in Europe, perhaps for understandable reasons, despite being on initial inspection a simple proposition. We encounter an abstracted but functioning full-scale version of an ATM (Automatic Teller Machine), created in stainless steel. Weileder insists that it is shown only in public, and only in a city's regeneration area/s. In other words, it becomes almost invisible, and part of the city's ordinary street furniture. Indeed as an object, *Cashpoint* is also a piece of perfectly honed minimalist sculpture: austere,

Figure 12

Wolfgang Weileder, *Cashpoint* (2008). Stainless steel, computer, cash dispensing mechanism. 60 x 40 x 60cm. Installation as part of the project 'Back to the City' in Newcastle, Australia, 2008, with Michael Tawa.

Courtesy the artist.

geometric, and industrially manufactured. Depending on our framework of reference, we might read its appearance as either akin to something that the minimalist Donald Judd might have made, or equally as an object intended to fit, comfortably and unobtrusively, into a corporate façade.

However, *Cashpoint* is not merely a 'sculpture'. It only functions in relation to a public context, in which it 're-directs the expected and habitual flow of people through the city'. More provocatively, it achieves this by redirecting the flows of capital which both banks and the state usually organise. The originality of *Cashpoint* lies in the unexpected situations and relationships it generates. We might say that it exists only in the narratives it creates in those who see it, or hear about it. The existence of the work is intended to be revealed gradually, as it becomes a story told by word of mouth throughout its city. (It is secreted into the city: unlike most public sculpture, there is no accompanying publicity, unveiling ceremony, or accompanying information.)

The principal noteworthy feature of this cashpoint is that it dispenses a banknote of the smallest denomination available, once a day every day, at a random, computer-chosen interval. Behind the façade sits a computer, programmed to choose one second from the 86,400 in each day to release a £5 (or 5 Euro) note. The process repeats for as long as the work is funded, as the source of its capital is central to its working and meaning. Weileder insists that *Cashpoint* only distributes *public* money. In doing so, he has created an inverted image of the public philanthropy towards the banking sector that is itself an inverted image of progressive redistribution. Since 2008, the UK government has

Figures 14 and 15
Wolfgang Weileder, *Cashpoint* (street views) (2008).
Courtesy the artist.

deployed £66 billion in underwriting the financial sector.[26] Weileder's work returns a tiny proportion back to the public, amongst other tasks, by establishing a publicly funded, free bank that 'gifts' cash to members of the public. One (classic Surrealist) means of picturing the-world-turned-upside-down is to re-invert it back again.

Cashpoint also recalls Robert Tressell's novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, published in 1914. Its centenary is painfully apt: once again, the beneficiaries of public generosity have been the most privileged private individuals. Entire citizenries have become philanthropists towards capital-rich institutions (and their employees) in almost exactly the model that Tressell outlined. *Cashpoint* exists, then, principally in relation to the idea that we ordinarily refer to 'the economy'. Weileder suggests that we inhabit *an* economy rather than the (only) economy possible, and that other forms of exchange exist.

For neoliberal governments to socialise debts accrued by organisations that were critical of state intervention is, of course, something that would have delighted the Surrealists in its absurdity and outright improbability. André Breton maintained that his modus operandi was, simply, 'to outplay the probable'.[27] It would appear that many financial leaders' attitude to risk in recent years was similar, and that in 'outplaying' the markets, they outplayed entire governments and populations inadvertently. Rather than being based on infallible algorithms and data capture, 'outplaying the probable' has been the basis of what was punitively called wealth creation by many.

For Weileder *Cashpoint* exists in part to create a bank that disregards or inverts all usual logics. It disperses capital rather than accumulates it. It rewards people at random, rather than in proportion to their efforts or their place in the economy. It creates an alternative gift economy that cannot be reduced to cost–benefit analysis. It inverts the roles of public and private, or at the very least confuses them. While *Cashpoint* is 'pointed' in its purposes, it is generous in its actions. It echoes Picabia's thoughts above. The small, fragile paper objects – credit notes – that are circulated are 'genuine bargains' at 'unheard of prices'.[28] But more importantly, Weileder invites us to speculate if whole constellations of ideas – or even an entire worldview – have seen their stock fallen since 2008. He queries if our own values have themselves become unexpectedly devalued.

For the three artists here, there remain other possible financial worlds beyond that defined by polar opposites of excess and retrenchment, of a rush to credit and an accompanying crash. As this chapter has outlined, they do this precisely by re-introducing us to the world we already inhabit. Each asks, if only implicitly, how we might imagine other ways of circulating capital and creating value beyond recycling and repackaging debts. In doing so they take it as a given that history, rather than merely capital, is 'liquid'.

Notes

1 Quoted in Philip Coggan, *Paper Promises: Money, Debt and the New World Order* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 2.

2 Quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Surreal Lives: The Surrealists 1917–1945* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), p. 165.

3 Helen Paul, *The South Sea Bubble: An Economic History of Its Origins and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 10.

4 For a detailed discussion of the way that economics has historically turned to the other sciences for its metaphors and theoretical framework, see Philip Mirowski, *More Heat than Light: Economics as Social Physics, Physics as Nature's Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5 Nikolai Kondratiev, *The Major Economic Cycles* (Moscow: Voprosy Koniunktury 1925).

6 The classic analysis of financial crises as an identifiable part of the business cycle is provided in Charles P. Kindleberger, *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises*, 4th edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

7 Carlota Perez, *Technological Revolutions and Financial Capital: The Dynamics of Bubbles and Golden Ages* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002).

8 Nicolas Bourriaud's seminal text *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses Du Reel, 1998) popularised the idea that, 'The contemporary artist is a semionaut, he invents trajectories between signs'. A decade later, exhibitions and texts on re-enactment coincided across Europe and America. See for example, http://atc.berkeley.edu/201/readings/Blackson.pdf, accessed 18 October 2013.

9 Interview with the author, August 2013.

10 In the photographic series 'High altitude' (2008–10) the German artist Michael Najjar provided a similar rendition of the stock market graph as a digitally manipulated mountain range.

11 Interview with the author, August 2013.

12 Interview with the author, August 2013.

13 For an account of the links between postmodern finance and postmodern theory, see Mark C. Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

14 Interview with the author, August 2013.

15 Interview with the author, October 2013.

16 Ibid.

17 As part of the exhibition *To Have and To Owe* (New York, 2012) the artist Cassie Thornton and academic Leigh Claire La Berge created a wall-sized infographic charting the interconnections between the stock market crash and the incidence of words such as 'complex' in financial journalism (http://to-have-and-to-owe.tumblr.com/, accessed 18 October 2013).

18 Interview with the author, October 2013.

19 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 71.

20 Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 153.

21 Ibid., p. 153.

22 Ibid., p. 357.

23 http://brokershandsontheirfacesblog.tumblr.com/, accessed 18 October 2013.

24 Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 230, 358.

25 Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing*, p. ix.

26 http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/06/10/uk-britain-banks-privatisations-idUKBRE9580JB20130610.

27 Brandon, *Surreal Lives*, p. 214.

28 'There is a fundamental difference between the paper money system and the metallic standard it replaced. Gold is no-one else's liability: you can own it outright. Paper or electronic money is always *a claim on someone else* whether a bank or a government. Modern money is debt and debt is money'. Coggan, *Paper Promises*, p. 3.

The only way is up baby

Ben Lewis

An imagined argument between a contemporary art dealer and an art critic.

In the last ten years I have had scores of arguments with people who think there is nothing suspicious or incredible about the contemporary art market. I have been able to hone my answers to their criticisms over many encounters. Here I present my arguments in the form of a dialogue.

In 2008–09 you made a film called *The Great Contemporary Art Bubble* which purported to investigate the contemporary art market, alleging widespread market manipulation.

Yes, did you like it?

No. It was the work of a man who hates contemporary art and wants to destroy it.

It was the work of someone who loves contemporary art – and wants to save it.

Do you still get any work as an art critic?

Not much. Within 6 months of the release of that film, my commissions as an art critic were reduced by over 80 per cent – roughly the same percentage as the crash in the contemporary art market worldwide.

Ha! You ended that film with the words, 'The Great Contemporary Art Bubble will go down in history as the epitome of the vanity and folly of our age'. How much more wrong could you be?

I was right in several ways. The market did crash that year, 2008–09, and only began picking up again in 2010. Volumes of sales went down by 50–75 per cent, depending on how you calculate it. Prices for many artists have crashed and not recovered. Take Hirst for example. According to Artnet, Hirst works bought between 2005 and 2008 have since resold at an average loss of 30 per cent.

Hirst will recover. People are very funny, because they like buying things when they're expensive. They don't like buying things when they're inexpensive.

That is the classic sales pitch of the dealer. But if that were the case there would be no ups and downs in prices.

Yes, but the big art market is back: in May 2013 Christie's set a global record for a contemporary art sale with a figure of $495m.

Make your mind up – are people not buying art because it is too cheap, or is everyone buying because prices are going up? It is true that I did not anticipate the art market would reassemble itself more powerfully than ever, like the last scene in *Terminator Two*, when the robot reconstitutes itself from its liquid fragments. However, we should question how real the price rises really are. America is printing $85bn new dollars a month in its 'quantitative easing' programme. As one art market commentator observed in the 1980s, 'It's not the art that's not worth the money; the money isn't worth the money'.

Figure 1
Edwin Longsden Long, *The Babylonian Marriage Market* (1875).
Royal Holloway, University of London.

As a fan of contemporary art you should surely applaud the rise in prices paid for it over the last ten years. There are thousands more collectors coming from new markets like Russia, Latin America and Asia.

What has been happening in recent years is that the market has actually stifled innovation. Artists who arguably started out full of original ideas, simply recycled the same ones over and over again on an ever bigger scale because there was a market for them – as in Hirst's Spots and Prince's Nurse Paintings. The good ideas of the art of the 1970s have become gimmicks that have led to endless product ranges. Even much of the work of Ai Wei Wei takes European conceptual art formulae and applies them to Chinese content – a load of chairs or bicycles turned into a geometric shape etc.

Fortunately, your views are irrelevant today. Critics don't matter. The collectors and the museums decide.

True. One problem is the collectors are often the museums. Public money has shrunk dramatically in real terms as a percentage of the budget of public institutions. Museums need billionaire collectors to help them build new wings and buy new art.

'Twas ever thus. There have always been rich collectors buying and selling art. Look at the Medicis. And artists have always made work for a market. Look at Rembrandt.

We no longer live in a feudal system. We can expect a more up-to-date art market today than existed five hundred years ago.

There is a famous joke. Why do pop stars go out with models? Because they can. HNWIs (High Net Worth Individuals) buy art because they can too.

The relationship between the world of the rich and the world of art is more complex than that. When Roman Abramovich pays $80m for a Francis Bacon he is only paying $1m of that because it is a great work of art, and $2m because it enhances his social status. The remaining $77m is because of other features of this market.

Like what?

Today the core of the art market is controlled by a handful of key American and occasionally British players. Did you know that in the May 2011 contemporary art auctions in New York, 52 per cent of all lots in Christie's evening sale consisted of artists exhibited by Gagosian Gallery. At Sotheby's this number was exactly half. Sotheby's, Christie's, Gagosian, White Cube and a handful of dealer-collectors such as Peter Brant, Aby Rosen and the Mugrabis control the heart of the art market. They maintain prices most of the time in a premier league of artists (and there is a trickle-down effect through the whole art market). Anyone else who wants to join the club – a Russian oligarch, a newly minted Chinese multi-millionaire or Qatari Sheikh – can, but they have to pay a premium price for it, often bidding against these core group of dealers who all know each other. The new money is made to pay more by the old money. Is it a cartel-like economy? Depends on your definition of that word.

That is a conspiracy theory.

Perhaps, or more like a system with a few different people sharing the same objectives.

There's nothing illegal about that. It's just supply and demand.

No, it's not just that. Above all, these values are produced by market practices that are rare in other fields. Dealers maintain the prices of their artists at auction, to make sure they don't fall below a certain level, or to set new record levels. This seems to me to have been acceptable in a much smaller art market, where artists' careers were so fragile. Now the same strategies fuel a highly speculative market.

The auction market is used as a loss leader: a place where dealers parade their wealth and power, while the sale of works of art is not as simple as it appears. To give you an abstract example: you are a successful gallerist, with a number of artists whose work has grown in value over the last five years and a number of collectors who have bought frequently from your gallery. You wish to launch the career of a new artist. What kind of influence can you exert on your collectors? You might offer to sell them a work by your new artist with the verbal agreement you will buy the work back in a year's time, if they don't like it. Then once you have persuaded a few of your 'inner circle' of collectors to invest in your new artist's work, you can approach an outer circle, and tell them you have sold x number of works to important collectors such as Mr Y and Mrs Z...

That is all theoretical. What evidence do you have of market manipulation?

There have been some interesting incidents that have recently come to light that suggest conflicts of interest.

In the past year, two major collectors have also filed lawsuits against Larry Gagosian, the world's most successful art dealer. In one instance, the gallery took on a work for sale from a collector, and then offered it to a potential buyer in an email that read, 'Seller now in terrible straits and needs cash. Are you interested in making a cruel and offensive offer? Come on, want to try?'

In November 2010 the renowned art adviser and dealer Philippe Segalot 'curated' an auction at Philips de Pury, which was – amazingly – titled 'Carte Blanche'. Segalot picked the works in the auction. He and staff from his company were seen bidding against each other in the auction, and they purchased many works of art in the auction, apparently on behalf of different clients.

If there was anything suspect happening then market regulators would investigate.

It is rumoured that the American authorities thought of investigating the Philippe Segalot sale and even contacted some insiders about it. But they decided against it – probably because they think this is just the rich ripping off the rich. They are not as concerned as I am about the cultural impact.

You only have a handful of incidents which you would find in any market. One of the great achievements of the top gallerists and dealers is that they have turned art into a lifestyle – the art fairs, dinners, private jets all go together ...

... together with money laundering for which art is a unique tool, for these reasons: its sale and purchase are rarely public, the market is non-transparent and unregulated, and it's easy to disguise or alter the value of a work of art as you ship it around the world's tax havens – the customs officers are not connoisseurs. It's not a coincidence that the global system of tax havens, now estimated to contain around $20–30 trillion, has grown rapidly simultaneously with the art market.

So basically you think the reason the art market has grown so rapidly is that you can get away with stuff in the art market that you can't do in other financial or commodities markets?

That's what I used to think, but now we are discovering day-by-day that the art market functions much more like the corrupted markets of globalisation. In May 2013 the legendary art dealer Helly Nahmad was charged with running an illegal gambling ring for high-fliers. How appropriate in an age when artworks have become chips in a global casino. Also this same year, the hedge fund of Steve Cohen, the legendary art collector, was fined $616m for insider trading – not so different from the art world.

So what do you think should happen?

The art market should be regulated.

How?

Using the same kind of rules that apply to stocks and shares. There should be an overseeing body empowered to investigate abuses, like the SEC or FTC in America.

Art is a private purchase that an individual makes for his own pleasure. All that would be an invasion of privacy.

No, art is not like a Louis Vuitton handbag, that is used and eventually given away to a thrift store. It is an investment good, not a luxury good.

Even if I was to accept that, you cannot regulate the art market. Dealers have to support the prices of their artists at auction, otherwise the whole market would collapse. Everyone knows the game that is being played.

That's what they said about the financial markets in the 1980s, before insider trading was outlawed.

But there is a difference from the financial markets. The art market is too small to be regulated.

It is not as small as it used to be. All markets should be fair, no matter how small they are. Since I made *The Great Contemporary Art Bubble* several incidents of alleged market manipulation in the art market have come to light.

The market is too big nowadays for manipulations.

One minute you say the market is too small to regulate, the next you say it is too big to manipulate.

Do you think that one day the art market will crash again?

Yes. Definitely.

You will be wrong again. The value of art will never go down from its present levels. There are more HNWI individuals on the planet than ever before. They have accepted contemporary art as part of their lifestyle. There are cyclical movements but the trend is always upwards.

That is what they would have said in the late nineteenth century. At that time there was a huge art market bubble and an insatiable public appetite. Salon painters or Orientalists such as Bouguereau, Gerome, Makart, Meissonier and Sir Frederick Leighton became wealthy celebrities. Half a million people visited the Paris Salon each year. In 1882, a work by Edwin Longsden Long, *The Babylonian Marriage Market*, achieved a record auction price at Christie's for a work by a living artist: £6,500, which in today's money is £4m. Ten years after his death, Long's work had lost 90 per cent of its value. His biographer wrote, 'One of the Victorian art world's most important figures had drifted into relative obscurity. The throngs of visitors who went to see his work at Burlington House or Bond Street had disappeared, his auction house record dismissed as an isolated sensation'.