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The Rise of Mary Corse and the Ecstasy of Silence

By Drew Hammond

At the age of eighty-five the great Basque sculptor, Nestor Basterretxea, gloriously remarked that, "Some call me a dinosaur, but I would rather be a dinosaur than a mosquito!" The art world has seen many mosquitoes whose buzz distracts our hearing, and who, for a moment during their brief lives, seem to absorb all our attention when they alight on us to suck our blood, leaving an unsightly and irritating reminder that time quickly effaces until another season and another generation of the short-lived. At Art Cologne, a famous Berlin dealer whom I shall not name confided that, "There were many times we knew that an artist or an artist group could only last three or four years. We built them up and they became pure phenomena of the market. We all made money, and then they disappeared in the market as we knew they would. Did we do something wrong? Perhaps the collectors eventually lost their investments, but for a while, they got what they wanted, which was to be seen as having the latest thing. At least the artists could get enough money to establish themselves in some other activity without starving first."

Changes in art history and art market evaluations, while ever present, can assume many guises. And the pace of such changes can idle, coast, or accelerate at whiplash speed. Market evolutions can decisively affect even the prices of artists who have been producing work of consistent quality in a consistent price range for decades. Then it seems like an arbitrary and mysterious movement of the divine will when suddenly, such an artist takes off and soars out of sight. A case in point is the California artist, Mary Corse, who began as a teen-aged prodigy Corse did not undergo the usual evolution from early to mature work. Like Athena who sprang from the head of Zeus fully formed, dressed and armed, Corse has been producing mature work of exceptional quality since her first show at the age of nineteen, in 1965.

But despite the art historical importance of her work, its identifiable feature of changing as you view it, and the sheer visual power it conveys to layman and specialist alike, the work has been underestimated by the marketplace until this year when its prices in galleries have risen four-hundred percent to six figures, and, if current trends and market demand continues, could easily reach the million dollar mark during the next three to five years. What are some of the conditions that make such a rise possible? The old answer was that art like any other commodity to be "consumed" is, like any other product, subject to the law of supply and demand. As an object of contemplation, art, in the strict sense, has no use value like a functional object, since utility diminishes the degree to which a work is fully contrived by the artist, and therefore alters its nature. Instead, it becomes a design object with aesthetic properties. The fact that art has no use value is a precondition for its more transcendent role.

However, this "uselessness" or art in the conventional sense makes it no less subject to the law of supply and demand than a pair of shoes. No matter how artists since

the sixties have made art seem to mimic the infinitely reproducible character of industrial goods as a theme of their work, art remains to a degree a unique object with the hint or the unattainable that makes it even more rare and therefore even more sensitive to demand side price inflation than almost any other sort or object.

But in our effort to decipher a sharp price rise, to recognize that art is even more acutely subject to supply and demand begs the question or how this demand arises and why at this time after decades of consistent and developing work.

Before examining the external factors, let's not forget that in order for a work to be "discovered" and sustained by an international market in the elite circles of galleries, collectors and institutions in question, it is indispensable for the work to be of great quality. By this I do not mean some arbitrary and subjective matter or taste, but a demonstrable evaluation of the importance or the body of work in art history, both for its innovation and as a unit or meaning whose expression would be inadequate in any other form. A generalized recognition and declaration of these attributes by a consensus or sound critical and scholarly evaluation has a direct corollary in market prices-which is why the most successful galleries do their best to try to fund and control such a consensus, sometimes for artists in which they truly believe. In either case, an astute collector would do well to examine that which has been written about an artist, and by whom. But the ideal collector would anticipate it based on the ideas, the way Kahnweiler did with Picasso. Since Kahnweiler purchased the works, it is not amiss to say that he was a collector before he was a dealer and writer on art theory.

In the case of Mary Corse, the matter of demonstrable quality is so evident that it is difficult to explain why critics and curators have too often overlooked it in the past. A few of these omissions nearly strain credibility. In 2004, for example, Ann Goldstein, an otherwise competent curator who was at MaCA LA for twenty-five years before assuming the directorship of the Stedelijk in 2009, curated an important show at MaCA entitled *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968*, described by the museum as "the first large scale historical examination in America to examine the emergence of minimal art in the late 1950s to 1960s." Although, for whatever obscure reasons, the show included work by Claes Oldenburg, an artist who is anything but a minimalist, the curator also failed to include work by Mary Corse, an omission that arguably distorts the development of Minimalism, and temporarily denied the artist a legitimate historical precedence for some of her innovations. Although Goldstein was not available for comment during this writing, the artist has confided to friends that Goldstein had simply overlooked the fact that Corse's work had been shown as early as 1965, and therefore was well within the ten-year period (through 1968) that the MaCA show covered.

Despite this kind of public curatorial lapse, there are a number of features of Corse's work that should not leave any doubts about its art historical precedence and innovation. Overtly, the work respects the rigorous formal geometry of Minimalism. This formal symmetry was necessary in order to advance Minimalism's more radical assertion or an objective that originated with 20th century Modernism, the idea that a work of art should aspire to autonomy by dispensing with the referent that a work could succeed in representing only itself.

As Minimalism germinated in the late fifties and early sixties, and took root in the seventies, de facto it posed a repudiation of a central unifying feature of Abstract Expressionism that dominated New York in the forties and fifties. This was the idea that the application or pigment should be mediated through an imposed degree or accident: Pollocks drips; de Kooning's scrapes with a putty knife (behind the blade and visible after the fact); Rothko's "dye's effect;" Barnett Newman's layers of paint applied to wet or hair dry underlayers with unpredictable results; Frankenthaler's "bleeds" into unprimed canvas, and others. The central formal tension of Ab-Ex was one of intention and accident.

But accident, whether or not artists intentionally introduced it, was as objectionable to the Minimalists as was gesture-gesture or "mark-making" because it smacked of representation; accident, because it would relinquish the absolute control required by the artist to effect a work's autonomy.

Convinced that perception is the most central criterion of the aesthetic act, Corse evolved a technique that causes her paintings to change noticeably as the viewer crosses the field of view, causing entire "hard-edged" fields to appear and disappear with even subtle changes in the point of view or the ambient light, often exposing textures and even brushstrokes where a moment before, one had seen only an undifferentiated flat surface, thereby transferring the accidental element to the perception of the work rather than its execution.

One of Corse's most subtle achievements, and one which radically distinguishes her work from that of her Minimalist predecessors, is the way it compels Minimalism implicitly to incorporate that which Minimalism largely had been devised to repudiate: without representation, Corse's work comprises both gesture and accident. By oscillating between painterly or gestural constituents and formal geometric rigor through the changing perception of it as it transforms itself before our eyes, her work introduces to Minimalism a new kind of tension. It does not merely oppose technical and theoretical features of Abstract Expressionism and earlier Minimalism, it subsumes them.

Even if it were only for this fact alone, as a synthesis that transcends two earlier movements, it is not rational to dispute the art historical importance of Corse's work. But since the work has exhibited these qualities as they evolved over decades, the question remains: why now? Why do the prices rise now?

One explanation resides in a trend that continues to affect the art world across the board: the shift of power from public to private institutions. When we think of private institutions, we often mean the spaces opened to the public by supercollectors such as François Pinault. Administered through his foundation and housed in his Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Pinault's collection also finds room for further exhibition space at another Venetian real estate acquisition that, in price terms, must seem trivial in comparison with his art purchases, the Punta della Dogana. Victor Pinchuk, the Ukrainian billionaire, has founded his Art Centre in Kiev to house much of his \$200 million collection. The institution funds prizes for young artists, curatorial studies programs and an ambitious, ongoing acquisition program that often seems to prioritize artists based on the number of zeroes in their auction quotes. Arguably, the most conspicuous of all the supercollectors with a private institution is Roman

Abramovich, together with his consort, Dasha Zhukova, who, with ample funding from the former has founded in Moscow the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, "dedicated to exploring and developing contemporary culture."

Despite whatever positive contributions to culture one mayor may not ascribe to these institutions, they certainly have received a degree of criticism, most recently from the venerable and theoretically sophisticated German art journal, *Texte Zur Kunst*, whose most recent issue is entitled *The Collectors* and sports a rather unflattering portrait of Abramovich on the cover. Although the journal looks at the question of these private institutions from a variety of perspectives, a persistent and well-substantiated theme is that, having usurped the primacy of under-funded public museums, culture industry finds itself exiled to the land of the Philistines for whom art is not an end, but a means to provide a fig leaf for less exalted for-profit activities, or an implied decoration for a consumer luxury brands conglomerate.

To my knowledge, Corse's work, for better or worse, has yet to make its way to the supercollectors aforementioned, but it certainly appears in the more venerable private institutions whose motivations are uncontroversial and whose choices already have withstood the test of time. These include the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation Collection in Los Angeles and the Andrea Nasher Collection in Dallas, among many others. Unlike some writers, I do not hesitate to include certain galleries among the private institutions. Jay Jopling's new White Cube Bermondsey space, which opened with a Mary Corse show in one of its "North Galleries" during London's Frieze week, is a 58,000 square foot former warehouse that comprises, besides offices and exhibition galleries, an auditorium and a bookshop of gallery publications. Its opening prompted the Financial Times reviewer to write that "A convergence between the roles of public and private institutions is a leitmotif of our age."

In fact, the British and German galleries (e.g. Max Hetzler in Berlin) that are adopting this institutional model are most likely taking their cue from Corse's Los Angeles dealer, Douglas Chrismas of ACE Gallery, who has been operating this way for decades. One of ACE's Wilshire Boulevard spaces has more square footage than the Whitney Museum; the interior spaces are, more often than not, better designed and lit for viewing art than most public institutions. Soon, ACE Gallery is scheduled to open yet another Los Angeles space, not a commercial gallery per se, but, in effect, a Kunsthalle, or museum without its own permanent collection, that will comprise approximately 300,000 square feet, or a bit more than six times the size of White Cube Bermondsey.

Spaces like these are the equal of public museums in their aesthetic potential. But they have the freedom to show recent work. And in comparison with the glacial pace of museums that must seek additional funding for special exhibitions, endure lengthy board approval protocols, and whose curators often do not remain with the institution long enough for what can be a three to five year lag time from conception to show, private institutions and galleries can move, comparatively speaking, in the twinkling of an eye.

It is not that Mary Corse is without a presence in public institutions, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), MaCA, and others, but it is the

current shift of the center of gravity of the art world to private institutions that has helped to internationalize the dissemination of her work and raise its prices. Ironically, this, in turn, has generated a flurry of interest from public institutions currently planning shows.

Attention from private institutions and the major galleries that are showing, have shown, or are scheduled to show the work (notably, ACE, White Cube, and Lehmann Maupin in New York) is inseparable from the skills of dealers who are well aware of the work's history, and who have the standing to convey its place in history to those who can help guarantee it. A gallery like ACE has the power to mount a major career retrospective of an artist to rival that of any museum. Today, this is often inseparable from commerce because money is the only commitment to an artist that has any tangible reality. This fact does not make other sorts of commitments less real or less ultimately important; they simply are intangible and to that degree, they resemble more ideas than actions.

But this is not to say that dealers' estimations of artists' work are any less accurate. 'The uncanny thing about Mary is that her paintings were immediately good,' recalls Christmas, who has known her for forty years. "You think of Hans Hofmann, who didn't do anything good until he was forty-five. Roy Lichtenstein's paintings .. before he was forty, they were terrible. Every artist goes through a learning process of exploratory art making. But in her teens, Mary was already making mature work. By age nineteen, she had developed her own [formal] language.

"She lives in the countryside, and in order to do the most creative part of her work she rises at four in the morning, a time when you don't even hear any birds chirping. She is fond of saying: 'When you're painting, silence is ecstasy'"

A quantifiable approach to a rise in art prices also has emerged. In 2010, William Goetzmann, a professor at the Yale School of Management, together with his co-authors, devised a model that revealed a direct correlation between historical rises in art prices and rises in income disparity measurable by the Gini Coefficient, a formula for calculating income inequality and recognized as a standard by The World Bank and other international organizations. Experts from many backgrounds acknowledge that we are in a period of heightened income inequality, and sure enough, art prices are rising generally, but these figures, while accurate and useful, do not enable us to predict with precision which artists are most likely to break out in price evaluations.

In the end, it is the ideas that are decisive. Unquestionably, we are in a period when many aesthetic ideologies are jockeying in a drive to achieve art world hegemony. For this writer, no clear victor has yet emerged. In the 20th century, artists invented the aspiration to autonomy that would have art dispense with the referent and, by definition, made an remote from or removed from reality. More recently, and perhaps in reaction to this broad trend, we have witnessed the rise of art forms that pose a radical synthesis between art and reality. But there are signs that this tendency that accelerated since the eighties is now exhausting itself, and has no undisputed successor, but only a range of competing pretenders. For the sake of creative expression, we can certainly hope for the failure of one of these contenders recently put forth at Venice: the idea that the proper role of the artist is that of a curator, or a commissioner who assembles other works of art in order to derive from them

tensions unintended by the artists who made the works of art that provide the raw material for such assemblages. But a prolonged triumph of such an idea, already dated, is improbable. Perhaps in such an atmosphere, an art form that can distinguish itself is precisely one that does not pose a synthesis with reality in a way that assumes its objective character, but which instead compels a vision of a dynamic, mutable perception of reality. If this happens, then Mary Corse will be neither a dinosaur nor a mosquito, but author of the embodiment of the way we perceive all things big and small.