

WEEKEND COLUMNISTS

## Anthony Haden-Guest

### Boom times, bad times

By Anthony Haden-Guest

Published: July 28 2007 02:47 | Last updated: July 28 2007 02:47

Anybody trying to keep up with the news gushing in from the art world these days could be forgiven for believing that things have never been giddier. Recent events, such as the record-breaking £180m plus sales at Damien Hirst's show at White Cube in London, suggest the market has become a giant unstoppable Energizer Bunny. But from those in the trenches, namely dealers in emerging artists, among whom the superstars of the future are lurking, you may hear a more sober story.

Henry Allsopp started his gallery, Allsopp Contemporary, in a 7,000 sq ft space close to London's Portobello Road two years ago. He represents 12 well-regarded emerging artists and the gallery has been both a critical and a commercial success. So has he benefited from the boom? Allsopp says it's been double-edged.

"The best time to start a gallery is when things are bad," he says. "Because by the time they are good again, your artists are known within the art community, which is the community that's actually going to make these artists successful – the curators, serious collectors and critics.

"If you've been around for four or five years and then suddenly a boom kicks in, you're going to be absolutely riding it."

For a young gallery, launching into the face of a gale-force boom is a wholly different experience.

"Running a gallery is always going to be very, very tough. But it's almost doubly tough in a booming market," Allsopp says. "What is different now from 10 years ago? Rents are sky-high. But you have to have the space. Because if you don't have a great space, your artists aren't going to get the attention they need. And if you deal with emerging artists, you have to have that. Otherwise, as a business, you're not going to move forwards.

“Marry that up with the fact that these days everyone wants to buy their art at auction houses or at art fairs. It’s almost as if the market is making the gallery obsolete.”

But aren’t galleries essential for managing the careers of emerging artists, for getting their work into the critical loop?

“Absolutely. If you are an emerging artist, you have to have a gallery, you have to show your work. Because if you don’t, you’re not going to get the critical acclaim. You’re not going to get the museum directors coming.”

Boom times can have equally dramatic effects on collectors. “Because everyone’s perception of the art market is that it’s booming, collectors, even if they are not buying blue chip art, expect blue chip results. When they are buying young artists’ work, they expect quick returns, which frankly is unrealistic,” Allsopp says. “Because it takes time for an artist’s career to get going. But because of the market, the expectation is that everything is going to quadruple in value over a matter of months. And the irritating thing is that there are examples of that happening. Banksy is quite a good one. But he is a crazy phenomenon.

“But don’t get me wrong. A boom is great. And being in London, although wildly expensive, gives you access to hundreds, perhaps thousands of new buyers, who weren’t around 10 years ago. And the attention new art is receiving is unprecedented. You only have to look at the Tate visitor figures. That’s what leads me to think the boom is going to continue.”

The list of performers who have crossed over into the world of visual art is long but the list of those that have earned respect there is short. It would, though, include the hugely influential rock musician Captain Beefheart, who made music from 1964 to 1982 and then, under his born name, Don Van Vliet, focused on expressionist paintings.

Van Vliet, who recently had a show at Manhattan’s Michael Werner Gallery and who now lives reclusively in Valhalla, a tiny community in northern California, answered questions by e-mail.

You used to paint several days straight, through the nights. Do you still do that?

“Of course.”

You once talked of making two paintings during one of those long painting spells that “I liked, and that’s unusual.” Do you reject a lot of work? If so, do you repaint them or destroy them?

“I destroy them, immediately.”

You have three images, “Untitled 12”, “14” and “22”. Why would the creator of album titles such as “Trout Mask Replica”, “Safe as Milk” and “Ice Cream for Crow” make something called “Untitled”?

“Just because he wanted to.”

You said you gave up music because you “got too good at the horn”. Painting is your second career. Could you get too good at that too?

“Well, we’ll find out, won’t we?”

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