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## Opinion /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
04 DEC 2007

## Con Man

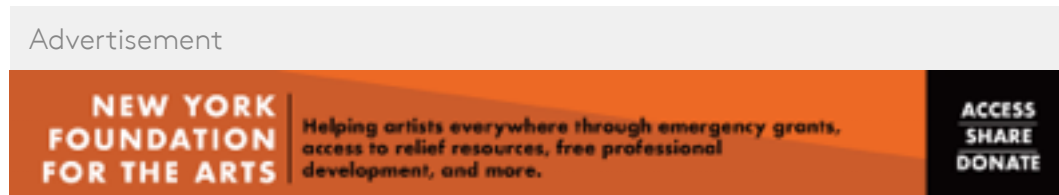
A recent article in London's *Evening Standard* claims that contemporary art magazines are 'simply in the business of selling art'

It goes without saying that critics should know their subject. Ben Lewis' odd and ignorant diatribe, *'So Who Put the Con in Contemporary Art?'*, was published in London's *Evening Standard* on 16 November and belies such logic. Confusing and conflating market forces with what is actually being produced on the complex and multi-layered stage that comprises the contemporary art world, he writes, 'You will search the colour magazines of the art press, such as *frieze*, *Art Review* and *Art Forum* and barely find a critical article, let alone a critical word. They are simply in the business of selling art, epitomised by the transmutation of *frieze* from magazine to art fair.' Later on he spits 'The art world is dirty, corrupt and immoral and if there was a name for such a crime, these people would be charged with perverting the course of art history. Of course, the art world has always been like this.'

Phew! Where to start? Lewis, who has never met me or any of the other editors of *frieze*, appears also never to have read the magazine. Over the 16 years that *frieze* has been in print we have always enforced the strictest separation between advertising and editorial, a rule that has remained unchanged since the inception of Frieze Art Fair. Since the magazine's beginning, we have aimed to publish only the highest standards of art criticism by established and emerging writers, critics, poets and novelists. To recap: every issue of the magazine includes around seven monographs, a questionnaire, regular columns and 25 reviews from around the world, from a variety of commercial and non-profit galleries, artist-run spaces and museums. We have published numerous themed issues, exploring subjects as varied as the relationship between art and ecology, feminism, slowness and slapstick. We pride ourselves on both the impartiality of our writers, and the quality of their writing. Reviews are often critical, but unlike Lewis, we back up our criticisms with facts and well-argued and researched opinions. Lewis' diatribe is not simply ignorant; it is deeply insulting to a generation of writers who have published their work in *frieze* and who have only ever approached their work with the highest integrity and rigour.

Lewis seems to think that the art world is a single glitzy, corrupt entity inhabited solely by Damien Hirst, a few lucrative galleries and the auction houses. He doesn't mention the hundreds of artists who work hard every day, often for many years, and barely manage to scrape a living. He doesn't mention the myriad non-profit art spaces, run by sincere, informed people, whose only aim is to expand and explore art's remit in contemporary society. He doesn't mention the countless talented writers who work tirelessly, and often for little reward, simply because writing and thinking about art are integral to who they are. He doesn't mention that most people who visited Frieze Art Fair aren't collectors; they're the general public, who, for the price of a cinema ticket, get to see works of art from more than 150 of the best art galleries from around the world, view a series of curated projects and sit in on an extensive talks programme that every year has included major international critics, curators and artists debating the state of contemporary art.

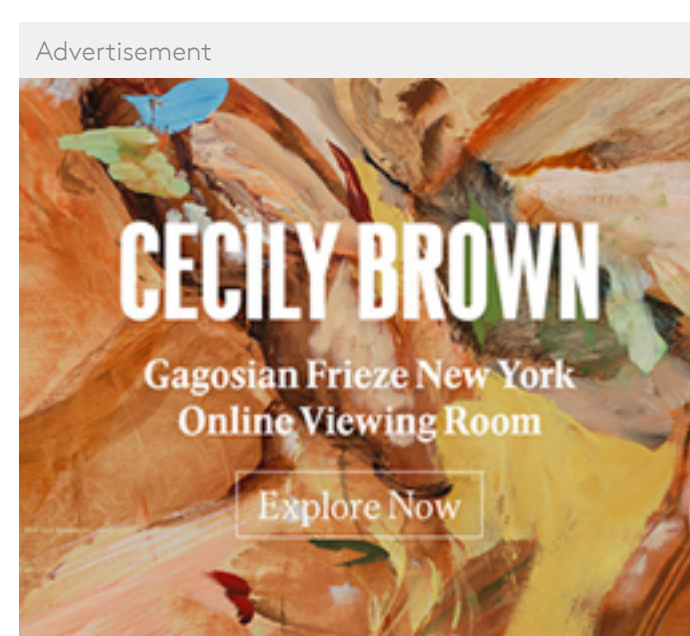
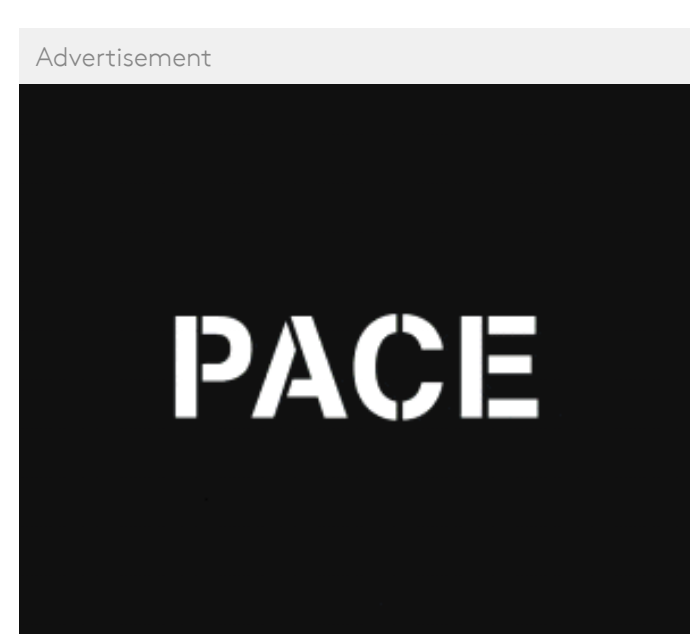
Lewis is simply perpetuating the kind of anti-intellectual resentment against art that is usually to be found in the tabloids. It is astonishing that the BBC has allegedly commissioned someone so willfully ignorant to make a documentary on the contemporary art market – almost as astonishing, in fact, that someone who professes to be interested in art should be so reductive and unimaginative in his approach to its contemporary manifestations.



### JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze's* first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

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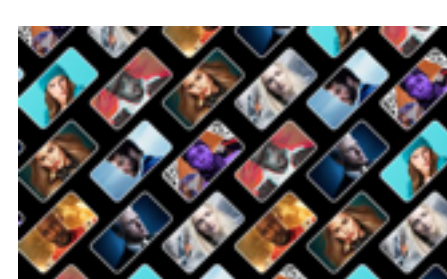
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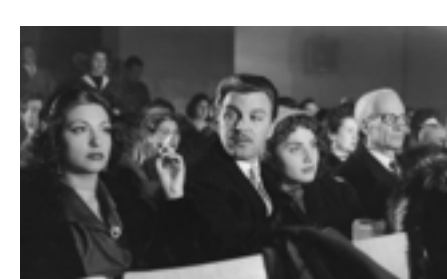
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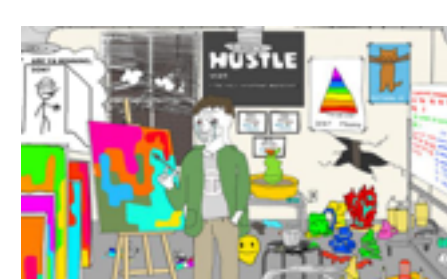
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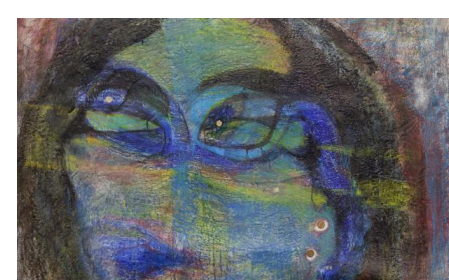
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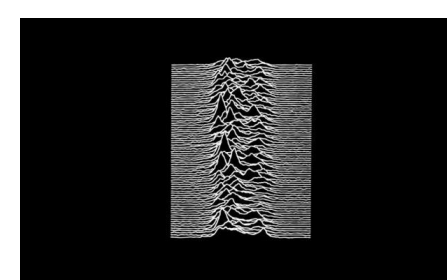
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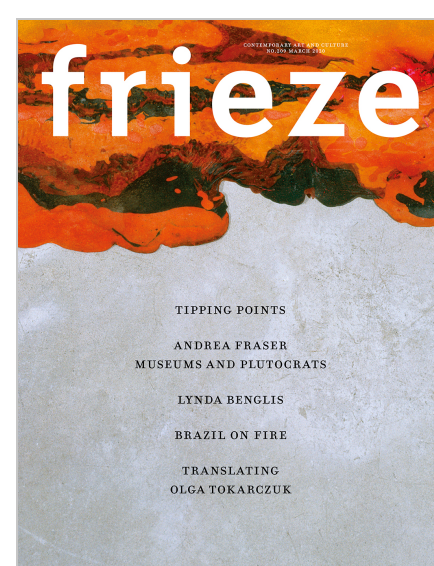


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