

The New Criterion

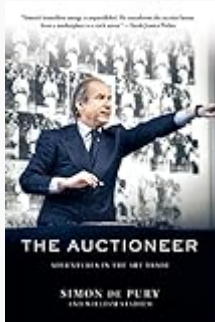
Books June 2016

Names & prices

by Benjamin Riley

A review of *The Auctioneer: Adventures in the Art Trade* by Simon De Pury

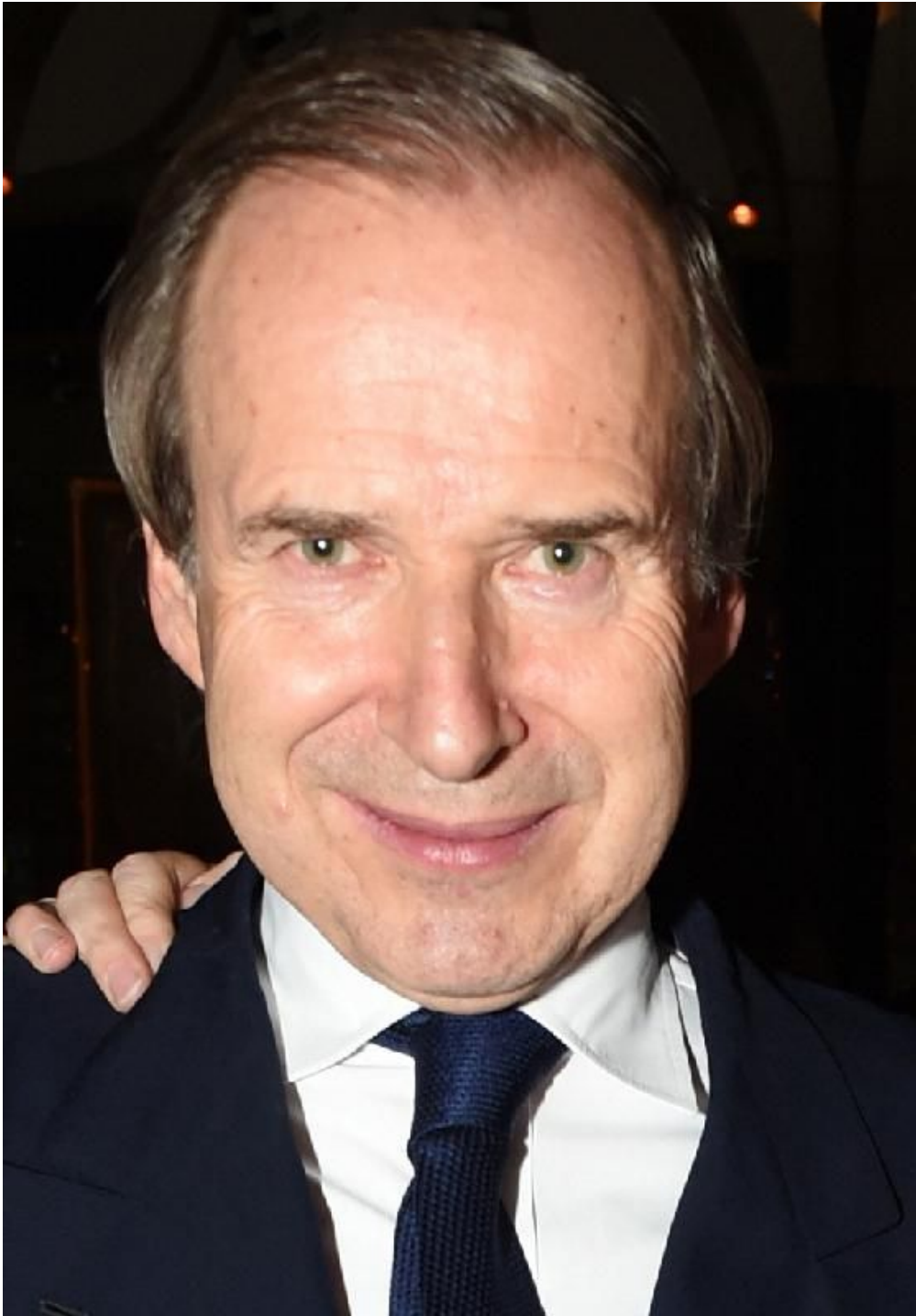
BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Simon De Pury

The Auctioneer: Adventures in the Art Trade

St. Martin's Press, 240 pages, \$25.99



*Simon De Pury at the 20th anniversary party for "How to Spend It" at Corinthia Hotel,
London, UK—25 November 2014/Financial Times, via*

The trouble starts on the first page of Simon de Pury's memoir, *The Auctioneer*. What could one expect of a book that begins with the sentence: "If anybody needed a rebound, it was I"? He uses the word "tycoon" twice and bellows the faux-literary exhortation—"O Captain!" There is no relief to be found on the second page where de Pury, the former president of the Phillips de Pury auction house, compares the breakup of his affair (with artinfo's patroness, Louise Blouin MacBain) to the felling of the Twin Towers by al Qaeda. On that very same page the author asks us to "please excuse [his] delusions of grandeur," but not before finishing the sentence by saying that

they “actually did have some foundation in reality.” This must be the same reality that causes de Pury to suggest that in falling for the artist Anh Duong, who “could surely be said to be the distaff trophy of the art world,” he had answered “a similar siren call” to the one that “had lured Odysseus to near-disaster.” We are, of course, still on the second page. Later we are subjected to an account of de Pury’s sartorial habits: his suits are from Caraceni and his red leather diary is from Smythson. In the words of an old Scottish television commercial: “I once had an Irn-Bru too, but you don’t hear me going on about it.”

It would be a tiresome exercise to point out each instance of a mottled cliché or dreadful line of prose or nettlesome name-drop, but a few more will be illustrative. Many times all three of the aforementioned sins populate the same sentence: “This was art, not sex. Such was Anh’s immersion in *la vie bohème*, Chelsea version. But art is sexy, as sexy as anything, and eventually something started between us.” “Microsoft’s Paul Allen, Mr. Seattle, was a huge benefactor of the emerging art scene in that Nirvana of tech. Mary liked the idea of bringing the mountain to Mohammed.” “As I previously noted [who could forget?], Anh is one of the only true bohemians I know. She has no false modesty, no prudery. There’s nothing *Swiss* about her, like the high-propriety people I had grown up around.” OK—I’ll stop the cruelty.

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Actually, please allow me one more. Since this is, ostensibly, a book about art, or at the very least that nebulous construction known as “the art world,” we should hear what the author, who, it must be admitted, is a major figure in said world, has to say about it. In a chapter called “Going Contempo,” we get de Pury’s *longue durée* view of the art market.

Contemporary art is the New Old Masters. That’s because there aren’t any more Old Masters for dealers and auction houses to sell. They’re all in museums. The same is becoming the case for Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, which are increasingly rarely found in private collections. And as time goes by, even twentieth-century modern art gets a bit long in the tooth. The Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock et al., seem Old Masterly.

I suppose the Old Masters sales that Christie’s and Sotheby’s continue to put on are nothing but a charade? The author projects his lack of interest in traditional art onto the art world without pausing to consider whether what he says has any relation to reality. De Pury refers to Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in 1987’s *Wall Street* in saying that “greed is good,” and it may indeed be for de Pury, who has enriched himself mightily by operating in the always increasingly bizarre contemporary art market. But he mistakes the price of a work for its value. In fact, he admits as much in saying that “in today’s pecuniary scorecard of greatness, the price of an artist’s work is often taken to be the measure of a man. What else could serve as a common denominator for the

diverse tastes of Wall Street, Russia, China, and Arabia?" De Pury buys into this pernicious idea fully. Not once, by my count, does he mention the formal qualities of a work: composition, brushwork—you know, those pesky things we're taught to look for and appreciate in art history classes. Inevitably when he mentions a work of art, it is either directly preceded or followed by its price. Early in the book de Pury claims that "ever since childhood my three obsessions have been art, music, and soccer." One suspects he has omitted mendaciously his only real fixation: money. "If the Romans came to the Coliseum to see blood, the New Yorkers came to Phillips to see money."

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what on the old New York Yankees was known as 'Murderers' Row.' " "My father was a baron, though that was a title he kept in the closet. (Just for the record, I'm one, too, and I keep my title in the closet as well. Self-effacement runs in the family.)" Self-awareness does not.

This book does no credit to de Pury's character. What might have been an insightful look into the looniness of the contemporary art market, to the inner-workings of which de Pury has been especially privy, is instead a grating, self-congratulatory list of names and prices. I should note that perhaps de Pury should not be the sole recipient of all the above abuse. He has a co-author in William Stadiem. De Pury says in the book, "whenever I saw a podium, I wanted to be on it." With regards to this unfortunate book, de Pury would do well to step off.

hen not ruminating on just how splendid the bags of money being paid for bad art is, de Pury traffics in the sort of tired formulations that are offensive not for their contents but for their laziness: "I mused at how the art market seemed to be dominated by these men with Levantine roots. I guess they shared some kind of genius trading gene." "An auction is only as big as its buyers, and tonight boasted

Benjamin Riley is managing editor of *The New Criterion*.

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