A Documentary Lays Bare the Absurdity of the Art Market

The Price of Everything, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, looks at the trends and gambles of the art market.

PARK CITY, Utah — Jeff Koons shows to a camera crew his massive, almost industrial workshop, where rows of assistants painstakingly create reproductions of old paintings for the artist’s Gazing Ball pieces. Koons is one of the most successful
contemporary artists, and his works have broken the world record for highest auction price multiple times. Meanwhile, in upstate New York, Larry Poons trudges through the snow to his cramped studio, where he’s been working on large, brushstroke-heavy murals for decades. A contemporary of Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Rauschenberg, he’s since seemingly dropped off the radar of art buyers. What exactly separates these two artists? Why is one selling works for tens of millions of dollars apiece and the other not? Who or what even determines how much art is “worth”?

The smartest thing about the documentary *The Price of Everything*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, is that it doesn’t try to pose definitive answers to these questions. In fact, director Nathaniel Kahn seems to understand that there aren’t any. Art is subjective, and value is determined entirely by complex vagaries of taste.

Kahn interviews contemporary artists both notable and less known, getting their opinions about the auction world and granting an opportunity to watch them work. Besides Koons and Poons, Gerhard Richter, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and Marilyn Minter are also featured. But since art and artists are the commodities rather than the players in the “industry,” the true lead subjects of the documentary are collector Stefan Edlis and Sotheby’s buyer Amy Cappellazzo. While the artists seem mainly
baffled by the market and would prefer to focus on their work, Cappellazzo and Edlis come closest to articulating why shifts in trends happen. At one point, Cappellazzo predicts that Koons’s value is about to fall because his output is now “lobby art.”

Of course, actual beauty, talent, and innovation only factor marginally in this. Rather than deny this, the art dealers interviewed for the film are remarkably candid about how coldly they approach their trade. Seemingly everyone almost gleefully acknowledges that they’re riding a bubble. They are wealthy enough not to care about any pretense of nobility — Edlis jovially explains how he often prefers to “trade” art rather than write checks to dodge taxes. Cappellazzo can even code switch effortlessly between being a buyer and appreciating the art, in one scene evaluating Crosby’s collage work based on its auction potential and in the next earnestly explaining why Giacomo Balla’s “Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash” is her favorite painting. Edlis is a fascinating enigma; while he seems very dismissive of most of the works he buys (he carelessly leaves Ugo Rondinone’s “still.life. (five lemons)” lying on the floor by his desk), he can explain what makes a piece interesting or not better than any of the professional critics in the movie.
Late in the film, it is predicted that the election of Donald Trump will prove “good” for the art market, the implication being that he will drive enthusiasm for further aesthetic excess. None of the buyers in the documentary can explain why they’ve shelled out millions for their pieces besides “this is what is chic” (that is, if they don’t just outright admit that they’re making investments). *The Price of Everything* is not about the love of art, but its exploitation, and that may cause some sincere aesthetes to cringe. Laymen, meanwhile, will likely remain baffled as to why big sculptures of metal balloon animals are selling for millions. The art market lays bare the absurdity of capitalism as a whole, in which value is not tied to anything tangible but to gambles based on trends. This movie may not be able to make full sense of the trends, but it’s a great peek into how the gamblers operate.

The Price of Everything by Nathaniel Kahn screens at the Sundance Film Festival Thursday, January 25 at 9pm and Friday, January 26 at 8:30pm. More info [here](https://sundancefilmfestival.org).