

Processes of Legitimization in Contemporary Art: the Young British Artists Phenomenon.

Abstract

The Young British Artists (YBAs) was a generation that incorporated elements from media, advertising and cultural industry into the art world in the late 20th century. Based on a case study of the group and the distinctive phases of its meteoric trajectory, we analyze the circumstances and agents involved in the processes of legitimization in contemporary art. As an instrumental tool, we use the model presented by Alan Bowness in his 1989 publication, which outlines the process that allows artists to access certain social recognition. This outline provides us with a model of reference upon which to reconstruct the pattern of the YBAs trajectory with the intention of determining the sociocultural circumstances surrounding the media phenomenon. These results also correct and modify certain aspects of Bowness' model to adapt it to the current socioeconomic context that sustains the processes of legitimization of art today.

Keywords:

Young British Artists, media, artistic legitimization, cultural studies, contemporary art.

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1. Introduction

This study aims to analyze the trajectory of the Young British Artists (YBAs), a collective of creators that represented a formula for easy success in the art system of the late 20th century. It focuses on the decisive factors involved in launching and developing the cultural phenomenon of the YBAs and examines the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding the construction of this international label. The study analyzes the process of legitimization experienced by this generation of artists who were able to derive artistic and professional returns from the incorporation of elements of marketing, publicity, and mass media. This study is framed within the contemporary art system, the process of legitimization of the artist being the fundamental axis around which the analysis revolves. Specifically, the research focuses on the configuration of the art system, its agents and their legitimizing capacity, demonstrating through the paradigmatic case of this British collective.

The configuration of the 'YBAs' label is the primary reference point of this study. The name itself was first used in 1992 by Michael Corris in *Artforum* magazine and in a series of exhibitions called "*Young British Artists*" organized by Charles Saatchi in his private gallery during the same year. However, it was not consolidated as a distinctive label until it was used in the catalogue published by the British Council for the Venice Biennale of 1995 (Thompson, 2010). The acronym of 'YBAs' was coined in *Art Monthly* magazine in the year of 1996. The inclusion in this group classification gave artists the key to be perceived as a relevant cultural phenomenon and the group labeling itself was of vital importance for the legitimization of its members.

Despite the media and the commercial success of the term that defined the group, YBAs appears to us today to be a descriptive term that is excessively imprecise and ambiguous.

Because of the three notions comprising the YBAs label: *young, British, and artists*, two of them are not entirely clear. Although some of them resided, or worked, in England, not all were British, and while most members were in their twenties or thirties when the YBAs phenomenon began to be forged, after more than a decade of the exploitation of the label many of them were closer to their forties. Thus, the YBAs did not truly fit the image spread by the media of rebellious, marginalized Londoners (Stallabrass, 2006). Along these same lines, While (2003) points out that their British character was largely linked to a focus on the media as it was considered a media strategy focused directly on the art market. How these self-promotional media and marketing practices are reflected in an enhanced artistic reputation is complex to gauge (Robertson, 2005).

2. Methodology

Drawing on the analysis of Becker (1974, 1982) and Bourdieu (1993), artistic and cultural worlds are understood as spaces of social and collective actions. The contemporary art market is understood as a complex system with many different types of art, players and sophisticated interdependencies (Morris-Hargreaves-McIntyre, 2004). Numerous studies have argued that legitimization or recognition in the field of art is part of a social process that cannot be reduced to a mere reflection of artistic merit (Baumann, 2007) or chance (Furió, 2012). The art system model illustrates the players who determine artists' trajectories as they accrue endorsement. A system in which economic value is largely a function of a process of endorsement by tastemakers within that ecosystem. The role of the tastemakers and the process of endorsement allows identification, selection and retention of some artists above others (Patterson, 2014).

Value is generated by social relationships and structures determined by the key players. The selection of artistic proposals are carried out by artists' peers, professionals, curators, dealers,

critics, artists and buyers, and provide advocacy and endorsement for an artist's work through exhibitions, critical appraisal and purchases (Morris-Hargreaves-McIntyre, 2004). To navigate through the art system, it is critical to understand the social dynamic interplay between key people, organizations and institutions (Patterson, 2014). Therefore, a relevant study of artistic legitimacy must analyze the social relationships within the art world.

Legitimization refers specifically to social acceptance by individuals or groups of a demand for authority and status (Diamond, 1997), and it is part of a broader process of socioeconomic construction (Bourdieu, 1998) that occurs when the unacceptable is recognized socially with a certain amount of consensus, although the consensus need not be absolute (Zelditch, 2001; Baker, 2012). In the specific case of art, consensus can be measured at different levels within the art world (Becker, 1982). Crane establishes a classification of *reward systems* that distinguishes how innovations in the field of art are evaluated, placing particular emphasis on those who function as 'guardians' of the field (Crane, 1976; Bourdieu, 1998). Meanwhile, Csikszentmihalyi refers to the notion of legitimizing guardians or 'gatekeepers' as individuals who decide or reject whether a new idea should be included within the 'domain' and become legitimized in terms of a canon (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993).

The study of legitimization within the sociology of art is concerned with how cultural products are positioned and how such positioning defines the products themselves (Baumann, 2001). To address this question around which this study revolves, the publication *El éxito en el arte moderno* [*Success in modern art*] (2012) by art historian Nuria Peist is taken as a key reference point. The work presents a methodological model based on the discourse of then-director of the Tate Gallery, Sir Alan Bowness. In 1989, he published *The Conditions of success: how the modern artist rises to fame*, a dissertation that aims to disprove the widespread belief that the trajectory of success of artists has to do with luck or circumstantial.

Bowness outlines, according to his personal view, a model of four phases through which artists' pass, from an initial phase until they achieve social legitimization. As shown in Figure 1, the model is structured around what he defined as *the four circles of recognition*, four phases or states that allow for the legitimization of the subject and through which an artist is lauded by the art system. These four states include an initial phase, called the *circle of peers*, comprising a set of coetaneous artists and generational peers of an artist. According to the author, artists are the first to recognize the exceptional abilities of their generational colleagues. Once this phase of excelling among equals is passed, the artist advances toward a second phase, *the circle of experts*, comprising art experts and specialized theorists whose main function is to contribute a certain language that articulates and grants meaning to the works. Bowness also includes in this same circle the actions of museum directors or curators who act as the equals of critics in classifying and defining new works (Bowness, 1989).

Thus, the third state of recognition is achieved: the *circle of the market*, which is organized around the actions of collectors, dealers and gallerists. Once the emerging artist obtains recognition by critics, according to Bowness, this facilitates the possibility of awakening interest among gallerists and collectors. Finally, the last step is the *circle of the general public*. This would be the final step toward gaining access to extended legitimization. The internationalization of the work is achieved in this phase, achieving access to spaces of broad visibility and recognition.

One of Bowness' most notable contributions is his attempt to provide a schematic structure that represents the very complex nature of the process of legitimization. As Peist states, what Bowness proposes is a sort of ideal trajectory for artists that could be defined as a progressive path in which certain levels of recognition are linear and consecutively acquired (Peist, 2012). In the decades following its publication, numerous authors have revised Bowness'

model. These include Natalie Heinich, who in 2001 made important corrections to the order of the legitimizing actions by agents, as did the art historian Angela Vetesse (2002, 2013) in several of her publications. Despite the limitations of Bowness' structure, which is a linear model, his methodological model will be used here to test both the framework pattern itself and to evaluate to what extent the trajectory of legitimization of the YBAs could fit within the pattern parameters.

The scheme of Bowness suggests a systematic approach to the art legitimization process, a model that portrait his particular impressions of the British art scene on the late 80s. A period in which he, as the Tate Gallery director, member of the Royal College of Art, and Director of the Henry Moore Foundation, was playing a crucial role as an active agent in the art field. In the same period the YBAs started their meteoric artistic trajectories. The relevance of Bowness' framework relies on its contemporaneity with the development of the YBAs, since both emerged in the same cultural climate. Now and then, the Tate Gallery in Britain was the centre of a network of public galleries which provided exposure for artists deemed (Moody, 2005).

Consequently, Bowness was in a privileged position for understanding, and even influencing, the artistic dynamics developed in London during the decade of the 80s. The well-known Turner Prize, a crucial element during the YBAs legitimization process, was established under Bowness's directorship in 1984, as an initiative to foster interest in contemporary British art (Spalding, 1998). Even today, after the development of numerous surveys on fame, success and consecration through a sociological and historical perspective, Alan Bowness is often referred to, due to the exploratory nature of his work and his important contribution in the understanding of the phenomenon (Quemin, 2017).

Therefore, his scheme results are suitable for this study, since it serves as a platform to analyze the crosstalk between the three more important dimensions that we study. First, the relevance of the spatial proximity between different agents and the young artists. Second, the temporality of the recognition process, and finally, the relevance of this recognition according to the judges' competences (Heinich, 2012). In addition to this, some specific contributions from Bowness's study made relevant the implementation of his approach to the particular case of the YBAs for this study. Considerations like how often new beginnings in art arise out of early conjunctions of outstanding talents (Bowness, 1989). Based on the idea that since the time of the Impressionists, great artists have almost without exception emerged from groups of artists working together, on problems of common interest (Galeson, 2005) and so, made explicit at the time, the need for a common denomination that could unite and indorse the works of a very diverse group.

Although Bowness is an art historian, not a sociologist, his perspective is largely sociological when studying the different steps that led artists to success and legitimization (Quemin, 2017). Bowness scheme helps narrowing down the approach of the complex process and agents interacting within the art field.

For this study, is considered the core of the YBAs group, the most prolific from the artists that Saatchi set on a series of shows called "Young British Artists" starting in 1992 at his Gallery in Boundary Road, St John's Wood. Most of them were students graduated from the Goldsmiths' College: Liam Gillick, Fiona Rae, Sarah Lucas, Michael Landy, Gary Hume, Nick Fudge, Damien Hirst, Angus Fairhurst, Mat Collishaw, Abigail Lane and Sam Taylor-Wood. Some of the most well-known members of the YBAs were students from the Royal College, such as Tracy Emin, Chris Ofili or Jake and Dinos Champman. Those 14 artists coming from Goldsmiths and Royal College, that Saatchi set together on his shows of 1992,

will be considered as the collective core and most prolific members of the YBAs. The reasons why they could be considered as an artistic collective were mainly based on the fact that most of them went to the same art schools, showed in the same exhibitions, were at first represented by the same dealers, came to the public's attention at about the same time and addressed popular culture and mass media topics (Cook, 2000). In a way, they were a product of a particular kind of art and social education. This education has placed a strong emphasis on self-generation and described the reality of the art world as a very competitive market place (Cook, 2000).

YBAs and specially Damien Hirst, is a new phenomenon that presents artists as trademarks and celebrity artist-brand, which generated a crucial shift from promoting to advertising and branding of artworks, focused not only on potential clients but also on artists, curators, critics and galleries. This influence not only affects the way individual artworks are perceived, but also it introduces some distortion on the notion of art itself (Buxadó, 2019). The process of creating the YBAs movement has been turned into an almost urban myth of self-help combined with careful manipulation of the artworld (Moody, 2005). These artists became art managers, a rare mix of curators, promoters, pop artists, educators, officers and public relations of the art world system.

3. Results.

3.1. The first circle, the birth of the group within the circle of peers.

The principle that will be applied consists of the evaluation of the agents involved in the YBAs group. According to Bowness, the first of the circles comprises peers; in the case of the YBAs, the coetaneous artists that supported one another in their beginnings. In this sense, it is necessary to highlight that there was not a precise selection of members that made up the

group, just as there was no defined artistic style shared among them (Stallabrass, 2006), nor was there any sort of manifesto or shared program published. They were very likely aware of the greater possibilities of appealing to critics and gallerists with a group identity rather than individually (Vettese, 2002). This is not unusual, for from its beginnings, the YBAs did prove a skillfully developed opportunist approach towards the dominant media of the times (Stallabrass, 2006).

In their origins, the vast majority of those artists were academic colleagues during the 1980s in courses at Goldsmiths, University of London, which was the point of departure for the YBA group (While 2003). As Martín (2007) states, at this institution the teachings were characterized by a high level of realism and a particular emphasis on the need for professionalization. From the outset, the students were treated as emerging artists, and the training prepared them to be professional artists after graduation (Shone, 1997). This commercial focus marked a dramatic shift with regard to the traditional dynamics of art based on the expectation of interest and the actions of gallerists and dealers. This was just one part of a broader set of profound changes that affected the art scene in London due primarily to government cuts to cultural subsidies (Dexter, 2001).

For Bowness, in this first phase of reinforcement among peers, the initial group would come to represent the way of moving jointly toward experiencing a certain innovation, finding in a community of equals the support needed to advance in the attempt to transform art (Bowness, 1989). Meanwhile, in the creation of the YBAs group, more than a source of support for experimentation, we find a representation in the face of media promotion because it functioned as a label, a classifying commercial brand. In this same sense, a crucial step in the trajectory toward legitimization was taken when some of the alumni of Goldsmiths began to organize self-commissioned exhibitions in abandoned warehouses in the Port of London.

The occupation of spaces not originally used for art would be one of the first elements of cohesion of the group. The efficacy of these events was apparent in their first presentation in society in 1988, with the legendary *Freeze* exhibition, where Damien Hirst himself was curating the exhibition. This irreverent show was the symbolic milestone that would define the group going forward. Beyond the ability demonstrated by the YBAs, working and exhibiting jointly to arouse attention, what the exhibition signified for the group was an inflexion point in its ability to become a powerful machine for media promotion (Stallabrass, 2006).

3.2. **A qualitative jump in the model: From the first to the third circle.**

After the success of *Freeze*, the first substantial contacts were made outside of the first circle. Long before any expert, historian, or art critic backed the work of the YBAs, their first contracts with relevant galleries occurred quickly. This is one of the most prominent characteristics of this group, their ability, not often seen until that point, to go beyond the selective filter of the *circle of experts* and jump directly to a space reserved for the market. As Stallabrass states, this period in the early 1990s was the moment at which the YBAs had to draw on the different resources available, many of them very different from the usual ones and in which they began to forge their specific characteristics (Stallabrass, 2006). These particularities were manifested in the development of strategies to generate significant media attention and promotional publicity, including close relations with the sensationalist press instead of the traditional critics specializing in art (Ray, 2004).

Undoubtedly, the search for media attention is a late-20th-century evolution of the search for the impact, hyperesthesia or shock, characteristic of many modern and contemporary art movements, as Susan Buck-Morss (1993) notes based on Walter Benjamin's observations of how *shock* is the nucleus of modern experience. In the YBAs, shock goes directly to the

media sphere, largely leaving aside the purely formal circle of the aesthetic world. Media attention operates as a sort of social skin, as Noelle Neumann (1995) states, upon which it is possible to generate interest and awareness.

It is in this second phase that their formal aspects begin to assume a group character, for the nature of the group's identity begins to be defined. To justify this process, it is essential to note the influence Charles Saatchi had over the group, and similarly over a large part of the international artistic landscape. Saatchi was what Hatton and Walker (2000) define as a *supercollector* who generally develops large collections of art, making their own selections of works and exercising a significant influence over prices in the art market. At the same time, he has been criticized from this same perspective, for Saatchi undoubtedly used his influence to distort the art market in his favor (Hatton and Walker, 2000). It is possible that socioeconomic factors such as the lack of major collectors of contemporary art in England, together with a general tendency to underestimate vanguard artists (Kent, 1998), contributed notably to Saatchi's rise to a position of a legitimate gatekeeper or guardian of access to recognition within the contemporary art system.

Beginning with the first YBAs exhibition in 1992 and until Young British art VI in 1996, the Saatchi Gallery was the place where the YBAs label would be consolidated and the very parameters of the movement defined (Ford, 1998). Even the conception of the first important exhibition, *Freeze*, was strongly influenced by a previous exhibition at Saatchi Gallery: the *New York Art show*, which had made a notable impression on the members of the group. It was from this exhibition that the YBAs would derive their *shock-art* tactics, although that artistic modality arose much earlier, with several antecedents existing in historical vanguards. As Stallabrass (2006) states, the exhibition would have a profound impact on the new

generation such that its modes and forms created the basis upon which future promotion would be grounded.

3.3. **The second circle: the experts.**

Regarding the circle of experts and its moment of appearance, worth noting are statements by the artist, writer, and art critic Matthew Collings, which represent some of the most discordant opinions in this respect. He declared of the aforementioned *Freeze* exhibition that it seemed entirely local and uninteresting and that perhaps it would not even have existed had it not been for the prior activity of the Saatchi Gallery (Martín, 2007). On the opposite critical side are statements by Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian* who describes *Freeze* as an exhibition that would take its place among the legends of the art world in London, equivalent to Picasso's painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* or the Dada Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich during the First World War (Martín, 2007).

From the very beginning of their trajectory, the YBAs sought out and attracted to their first exhibitions influential gallerists, curators, and experts such as Nicholas Serota, director of the prestigious Tate Gallery or Norman Rosenthal of the Royal Academy of Arts (While 2003). Meanwhile, the group's initial success attracted a large number of favorable journalists and critics. Some, as Stallabrass states, simply sought to celebrate them and join the bandwagon of success as long as their popularity lasted; others sought to explain them; and a few sought to give that extremely popular trend a rigorous theoretical basis, that is, not only explain it, but guide it (Stallabrass, 2006). Media, cultural journalists and art critics, such as Sara Kent, editor of the magazine and cultural calendar *Time Out* sought to solidify the mythology of the YBAs, playing a vitally important role in their initial promotion (Buck, 1997). A number of critics have ventured that it is no coincidence that the name of *Frieze* art magazine is a

homophone of the YBA student exhibition: *Freeze* (Adams, 2017), playing as well a key part in the process.

An important milestone in the trajectory of the group from the perspective of art experts was the multiple candidacies and several mentions of the prestigious Turner prize. As Thornton describes, while most art prizes are little more than a line on an artist's curriculum vitae, the Turner prize is a national event (Thornton, 2010). Over a period of ten years (1990-2000), the prize would be granted to the YBAs on at least three occasions, and they would be finalists on another five occasions. Back then, the Turner prize was still a quite novel award, but the prize itself and the show event associated to it, gained social repercussion, status and fame exactly during this period, along with the YBAs trajectories and the media scandals. As Stallabrass (2006) states, when the market went into hibernation, the media assumed importance in forging a reputation for artists, and the Turner prize became a good way to capture their attention.

The first large-scale public exhibition of the YBAs was when London's Serpentine Gallery attracted great media attention in 1991 with the *English* exhibition (While 2003). In 1995, Richard Cork, art critic for the newspaper *The Times*, would state that the YBAs had demonstrated that Great Britain was capable of producing an extraordinarily self-assured creative generation (Cork, 2003). Along similar lines, Arthur Danto (2000) would write that his admiration for this group stems from their ability to take on the questions of the ages, although they sometimes did so in juvenile or trivial ways. A year later, he wrote that their works demonstrate an example of exuberance and confidence little seen in the United States, especially praising the work of Damien Hirst, Jenny Saville and Rachel Whiteread (Danto, 2001). In this phase of the process of legitimization, the group would still be presented as a compact nucleus, although it would contain a heterogeneous number of members. Over time,

and as they acquired legitimizing clout, the creators would vary their postures to later distinguish themselves individually. This change in the order of actions and the importance of the legitimizing forces that is apparent in the trajectory of the YBAs is a key factor in studying changes in the paradigm of contemporary art.

3.4. **New intersectional states, the appearance on the scene of hybrid figures.**

Another demonstration of these paradigmatic formulas for success that were challenged by the art system in England in the late 20th century was *Sensation, Young British artists from the Saatchi collection*, the exhibition inaugurated in 1997 at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. This time, it was Charles Saatchi himself, as publicist, collector, curator, and gallerist, who would play the role of emblematic hybrid figure of the artistic reality of the moment. For a while Saatchi try to substitute for, or at least eclipse, the legitimizing ability of the second circle, that of experts, curators, theorists, and art critics. The *Sensation* exhibition, which included nine of the original 16 artists from the earlier *Freeze* show, would not take place at the Saatchi Gallery, but rather, taking advantage of the legitimacy of the entity, which boasted the honor of being England's most prestigious art school, the works would be exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts. Paradoxically, the official institution would not conceptualize this exhibition, but rather, it would be mostly premised on the criteria of Saatchi in collaboration with Sir Norman Rosenthal, who also played a key role in *Sensation* as exhibitions Secretary from the Royal Academy of Arts.

In the paradigmatic case of *Sensation*, the agents of the art market not only appropriated a large part of the abilities exercised by the aforementioned art experts, but they also used their institutions and spaces to imbue themselves with the legitimizing power acquired there. Saatchi's attempts to achieve the success of *Sensation* would be another example of these types of maneuvers. This time, it would be about exhibitions: *Ant Noises*, also curated by

Saatchi based on the key works of the YBAs, and *Apocalypse*, an exhibition that also took place at the *Royal Academy of Arts*, both focused specifically on the youngest visitors and mainly comprised works by them, once again with provocative intentions to obtain guaranteed media coverage. The media attracted by the scandalized attention generated by the YBAs through these years, proved to the old adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity, and it provided everyone involved with a great deal of a very useful free advertising (Adams, 2017). All this media coverage that the YBAs received, ultimately worked in the group's favor. Despite the criticism, the exposure and sales generated by the group, sparked a significant boom in the art market at that time.

The appearance of this model of a hybrid agent among artists, collectors, curators, and gallerists entailed an agitation of the existing art system. This factor would be especially significant for figures such as art critics and experts, for it would henceforth destabilize the balance of roles and powers within the system. There is no doubt that this model evolves from the progressive exit of the legitimizing models of traditional art, progressing toward a growing distance from classifications, legitimizing spaces, and even the very concept of object and artistic value.

3.5. The third circle: The market, galleries, collectors and auction houses.

In this third circle described by Bowness (1989), we will focus our attention on the role of the market, specifically the different agents who exercised their influence and legitimizing power to praise the YBAs to the top of the art system. Among these agents, we have already mentioned the primordial role played by Saatchi, initially, as a collector, and later as a gallerist for many of them, and finally as a curator, promoter, and ideologue of the identity of the group. He was the cornerstone of the legitimizing process, making massive purchases of their early works and commissioning pieces as significant as the shark in formaldehyde

entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) or the dissected cow and calf entitled *Mother and Child (Divided)* (1993). More than a patron or a dedicated collector, Saatchi was a true promoter, successfully disseminating and promoting his artists as few had done before.

Even if, as Montes (2014) states, perhaps he was a creator of his time, one of the first to understand and promote our era's most novel contribution to the history of culture: marketing and promotion understood as a fine art. Beyond the emblematic figure of Saatchi, there are big names in the art market who played important legitimizing roles. Among them were important gallerists and dealers like Jay Jopling or Karsten Schubert, who immediately after *Freeze* exhibited many of the YBAs: Gary Hume in 1989, followed by Matt Collishaw in 1990, and, all told, a total of nine artists, more than half of the sixteen that were included in *Freeze* (Shone, 1997). Compared with the small number of young artists who manage to land contracts with private galleries at an early stage in their careers, this should be interpreted not only as resounding promotional success but also as a decisive step toward legitimization. After them, a whole new generation of London-based gallery owners such as White Cube (Jay Jopling), Victoria Miro (Victoria Miro), and Interim Art (Maureen Paley) led the way in representing the group to a much larger audience (While 2003). The actions of these galleries, plus the support from prestigious auction houses like Sotheby's, were decisive in the rapid legitimization of this British art abroad, particularly among dealers and gallerists in New York (Shone, 1997).

The actions of gallerists and collectors who affected the careers of these British creators cannot be analyzed independently of the type of market that existed at the time at which they acquired the works. That is, first of all, the works were sold at relatively low prices, while the circulation of the works in the market was reduced or practically nonexistent. Second, the

influence of intermediaries between artists and collectors was scant, and, in most cases, it was Saatchi or Schubert in this first phase of the primary market who intervened in acquiring their works. Meanwhile, the situation was very different for the second generation of collectors, or those who acquired works by the YBAs in the secondary market, primarily through galleries and auction houses with international representation. This second type of market can be illustrated by the case of Steven Cohen, the U.S. investor whose acquisition of one of Hirst's first important works was widely reported by the media. As the iconic Hirst's shark was sold to Cohen in 2005 for no less than \$12 million (Adams, 2009) thanks in large part to the promotional work of Saatchi and one of the world's most famous dealers, Larry **Gagosian** (Thompson, 2010). In this way, Gagosian facilitate an international expansion that was crucial for the legitimizing process of some of the most well-known artists from the YBAs collective.

We can suggest that the actions of important agents of the art market such as Saatchi, Jopling, Gagosian or Schubert, in an early state of the group's artistic trajectory, practically within the arena of the *first circle of peers*, allowed the YBAs to position themselves as a successful artistic group for more than a decade. In this case, the unconditional backing of the commercial sector, together with a denial by expert critics, was decisive in the move toward consolidation.

3.6. **The fourth circle: The general public.**

It is relevant in this final phase to take a moment to expand on how the internal dynamics of the phenomenon of legitimization among the general public is produced. However, in his study, Bowness makes scant reference to the complexity of the functioning and nature of this conceptual notion. That is, Bowness does not pause to define the concept of 'public recognition' with any precision (Bowness, 1989). Furió notes the indistinctness of the complex

notion of the public, to which the author refers as the sample among which the artist is recognizable (Furió, 2012).

This final process of legitimization has experienced a great temporal acceleration during the second half of the 20th century, especially enhanced in the decades of 1960s and 1970s, when the star system has culminated in the artist as a media star. Andy Warhol is perhaps one of the first and most representative examples (Robertson, 2005), but there are many other examples of artists in art history whom used the media to good effect in order to speed up exponentially the legitimization process, since the surreal Salvador Dalí to the contemporary Jeff Koons .

It is within all of the other process of social acceleration that mark the transition to our current century (Han, 2017). The consecration time of the artist, and in general terms, institutional support, is produced with greater speed, especially notable in the case of the most blatantly provocative, violent, and openly anti-institutional works (Furió, 2012). It is this type of controversial art, which is based on transgression that would be supported by the institutions themselves (Parcerisas, 2004). We see this phenomenon reflected in the work of the YBAs who generally based their message on shock and morbid, controversial transgression. The simple and direct language of the mass media, employed to be consumed quickly and easily by the public, would perfectly satisfy the demand for the accessibility of the work among new audiences (Ray, 2004).

The other significant phenomenon with regard to reception among this last circle, together with processes of the acceleration of legitimization of transgression, is the aforementioned institutional support by public entities. This is something that similarly had not previously been experienced in art with such enthusiasm as the significant support received from the British Council to the YBAs, almost since their very origins. A reflection of this

phenomenon is the legitimizing access of the YBAs to the two major contemporary art museums of the Western world: the MoMA in New York and the Tate Modern in London, which acquired works for their collections and even organized retrospectives of the most prominent members in 2012.

To explain access by the YBAs to these institutions of major public dissemination, it is necessary to note that although they were part of an overall transformation of the British art scene, their ascent was also intrinsically linked to London's role as an international center of art and cultural industry (While 2003). Many critics have stated that London displaced New York as the center of the art world in the 1990s (Baker, 2012), and in large part as a result of the achievements of the British group (Galenson, 2005). Art critic Matthew Collings (1998) categorically declared that Young British Artists, over American ones, dominated the landscape of the art world. As stated by Kompatsiaris (2014), this type of artistic/cultural agitation involving the promotion of museums, galleries, and biennials lends a distinctive symbolic capital to the cities where they occur, transforming former industrial zones into attractive business opportunities for international investors who promote the value of the local art scene.

4. Conclusions

Based on the results of the analysis of Bowness as applied to the trajectory of the YBAs, several relevant conclusions can be established (Figure 2). Primary, the actions of the first gallerists and collectors, during the group's initial phase would notably legitimize the careers of these artists, making much more effective the maneuvers of the *third circle of the market* in moving the artists toward legitimization than the actions of art critics and experts. Expert critics initially had a small impact on the current art system. From this, we derive another relevant conclusion with regard to putting Bowness' model to the test: there is a clear

transformation of the order and importance of the actions of legitimizing actors, with the circle of 'experts' being relegated to a smaller scale and dimension in terms of its importance in legitimizing the work of new creators.

It can also be determined that there is a shift in the quality of the legitimizing relationships between gallerists and collectors. This transformation affects several issues. First, with regard to the aspect of temporality, counter to Bowness' criteria, the first significant collector in the case of the YBAs was Saatchi, who appears practically within the *first circle* of legitimizing action. Saatchi's immense importance in the configuration of the identity of the group, as well as its influence on artists and the social relationships it established, suggests the existence of a great personal involvement, motivated by a series of shared interests. At the end, the label *Young British Artists* was little more than a promotional invention of the "astute speculator/collector" (Robertson, 2005) and advertising mogul, Charles Saatchi. A reductionist label quite useful for uniting the works of an otherwise very heterogeneous group. Thereby it can be confirmed that the artworks produce by the YBAs, specially at an early stage, were influenced and inspired by a form of visual attack and shock not entirely dissimilar to the language of Saatchi's advertising own campaigns (Blanché, 2018). Therefore, the relationship between Saatchi's career in advertising and his impact on the YBAs, as well as in the contemporary art scene, were directly related (Chong, 2005) and somehow interconnected.

The first steps the YBAs achieved to ascend in their trajectory through the different states were based on formal heterogeneity, irreverent cynicism as language, violence and spectacular shock as the agglutinating elements. With the appearance of a constructed group identity, and due to the promotion of their first gallerists and the support of allied collectors, critics, and columnists, the group developed its meteoric and anomalous trajectory toward

international legitimization. One of the most significant factors of the YBA phenomenon lies in the fact that their trajectory began to take shape amid the English recession. This was when the first members of the group, with Damien Hirst at the helm, did something that until then had not been done in the rest of Europe: to finance, manage, and publicize their own work in a nearly completely autonomous way.

It was at this moment, once backed by the substantial sales of their work, represented by major firms and covered by international media, when renowned institutions took an interest in acquiring and exhibiting their work, whether through specialized agents or through individual donations. After arousing relevant interest, access was gained to two of the major contemporary art museums of the Western world: MoMA and the Tate Modern. Once again, this occurred unlike in the process defined by Bowness, only after the actions of different agents from the third circle, the market. It would be more precise to cite as responsible for the legitimizing process a series of multiple actors who act practically in unison, making it increasingly common for collectors, critics, and institutional curators to act in parallel in a sort of professional synergy in which multiple agents simultaneously play roles in promoting and legitimizing artists. Thus, Vetesse states that Bowness' model would only be acceptable if the marked states of recognition are accepted not as phases that necessarily follow one another in a linear manner (Vettese, 2002) but rather with overlapping simultaneity.

If we consider not only this case study of the YBAs but also multiple artistic phenomena occurring after the second half of the 20th century, one of the most notable characteristics of these phenomena is the way in which the processes of legitimization of art become notably accelerated in terms of time. As stated by Moulin (1995), in the last 25 years, contemporary art has been dominated by the fever of immediacy, with curators appearing alongside critics, artists, and gallerists at the vanguard of current art. The most notable change in these

mechanisms lies in the apparent speed and acceleration of access to legitimization by new movements. As artistic movements of all types were consecrated throughout the 20th century and the values of modern art became established as a fundamental part of the internal logic of art, emerging artists have experienced increasingly rapid access to social legitimization (Peist, 2012).

A reflection of this accelerated legitimization and great media profusion of artistic phenomena is a process of unprecedented proliferation in the number of artists, gallerists, museums, and exhibitions. The combination of processes of rapid acceptance of new works and great social interest in new projects results in a great acceleration of their cultural assimilation. The consequence can become what Serraller (2001) describes as the loss of the capacity for rupture by new movements, initiatives that no longer present themselves as vanguard but also do not act as such.

The relevant acceleration of the market recognition process and its consequently artistic legitimization, is what makes the YABs case special, which particularly resonates as an iconographic rapid model for social recognition. Since then, the profound socio-economic and cultural developments have fueled the art world's transformation of nowadays. The extraordinary alteration witnessed in the art world of today, is undoubtedly linked to changes in global society (Dempster, 2014) originated at the end of the previous century. This reality seems to be the driving force to present art as a commodity, and one of the major motivations for some artists to become themselves into rapid celebrity artist-brand (Buxadó, 2019). Furthermore, this is probably the reason why artistic movements and their linear succession have almost disappeared, and we should now use the concept of trends in style, something very appropriate that could be attributed to the rise and fall of the YBAs collective.

In conclusion, in this anomalous process of accelerated legitimization of the YBA collective, the role of the traditional media and marketing promotion was essential, in spite of the notable absence of them in the Bowness's model. By some means it was at the time -like the virality nowadays achieved by social media and the digital platforms on the internet- one of the essential tools used by agents from the art system to influence, fostering conclusive legitimization among the general public.

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1. Figures:

Circles of Recognition

(Bowness, 1989)



Figure 1: Circles of Recognition (Bowness, 1989). The four circles of recognition represent the four phases that allow the legitimization of an artist within the art system, according to Bowness publication *"The condition of success: how the modern artist rises to fame"* (Bowness, 1989).



Figure 2: Circles of Recognition (Revisited). Due to the transformation in order and importance of the legitimizing actors, we propose several adaptations regarding Bowness' model to the current artistic scenario.