Conceptual artist places gold cube in Central Park: Once again charlatanry meets extreme wealth

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In what would seem to be an item straight out of a satirical journal, Artnet News announced this week that "An Artist Placed a Cube Made From $11.7 Million Worth of Gold in Central Park—Protected By Its Own Security Detail." Instead, however, of skewering the absurdities and charlatanry of the art world, the Artnet News item treats the story and the "art" with utter seriousness.

We learn that *The Castello Cube* by German artist Niclas Castello (born 1978), a hollow, foot-and-a-half cube with quarter-inch walls made of 24 carat gold and weighing 410 pounds, was installed as a piece of "public art" in New York City's Central Park for one day only, February 2.

The cube was cast in a special kiln in Aarau, Switzerland, able to withstand the 1,100 degrees Celsius required to melt such a quantity of the valuable metal, now going for $1,800 an ounce. The work was then transported to Central Park, where it was displayed under armed guard to passersby, unlikely to encounter another item of such value in their lifetimes. According to Artnet News, the cube was subsequently scheduled to "make its way to a private dinner on Wall Street, where numerous celebrities are said to be attending."

With the pretentiousness typical of such figures, who combine banal artistic literalness with extravagant claims, Castello has termed his cube "a conceptual 'socle du monde' [base of the world] sculpture for our time." The reference is to Italian artist Piero Manzoni's *Socle du Monde*, an iron and bronze plinth installed upside down in Herning, Denmark in 1961 which "announces that the whole world is a work of art, rendering the artist obsolete."

In any event, Castello's cube is more than just a cube. Its debut in the park was accompanied by the launch of a cryptocurrency called "The Castello Coin," traded as $CAST. This is apparently available for purchase online at an initial price of €0.39 ($0.44) each, with an accompanying NFT [non-fungible token] auction scheduled for February 21. So the precious cube is also a potential "rain of gold" for the artist and its owners as long as the market holds up.

Viennese gallerist Lisa Kandlhofer, who was in New York for the artwork's launch, kept up the blather. "The cube can be seen as a sort of communiqué between an emerging 21st-century cultural ecosystem based on crypto and the ancient world where gold reigned supreme," she told the media. Gold and its equivalents still do reign supreme among the city's multi-millionaires and billionaires, engorged by the ever rising stock market during a pandemic that has claimed more than 5.7 million lives worldwide. According to a recent report from Realm Global real estate, New York is "still home to the richest people on the planet." As of December 2020, the city had nearly 25,000 "individual homeowners with an ultra-high net worth," defined as $30 million or above. With all that excess cash, what could be better than studying your reflection in a golden cube?

Various commentators pointed to the obscenity of a hollow square worth $12 million being plunked down in a city park where many homeless people sleep, even in mid-winter. One critic noted on Twitter that she had a friend who "lived with his dog … in the rock formations at Central Park." When the animal got sick, "there was only one vet who'd treat her for free, so every day he walked 100+ blocks to the Bronx because he couldn't afford subway fare. But sure, let's add a gold cube." Another put in, "They put a gold cube with security detail in the park where homeless people regularly freeze to death."

Castello's piece has been compared to other art works

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purporting to critique the indebtedness of artists to the desire of the super-rich to show off their wealth, which it is argued has long played a role in patronage and art commissions. During those centuries when art retained a "court character," its social and even personal dependence was not concealed but was openly declared. However, even "the art of the court of absolute monarchies was based on idealization but not on falsification" (Trotsky). Such relationships, for example, resulted in the commissions of Pope Julius II for the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo and Titian's "poésies" murals for Spain's Philip II.

That kind of art work, the result of talent, skill and insight into the myriad contradictions of human existence, which continues to resonate with viewers centuries later, is a far cry from a cube of gold. If one were to take at face value the claims of the apologists for Castello's art that his block of metal is meant as some sort of social analysis, the artist has still entirely abdicated his responsibility. The task of the artist is not to wallow in the foulness of contemporary society, much less to profit from it but to make sense of it. Bearing in mind that Castello, born in Stalinist East Germany and having grown up under the bombardment of rubbish about the "fall of communism" and the "end of history," is a victim of historical processes himself, doesn't make his response to his time any less deplorable.

Parallels abound to the *ancien regime* on the eve of the French Revolution of 1789 and Queen Marie Antoinette's possibly apocryphal response to the starving masses, "Let them eat cake," or in this case, "Let them see gold." This outlook epitomizes the callousness and shortsightedness of a ruling class that has lost its head.

At the same time, as much as anything else, the golden cube in Central Park speaks to the bankruptcy, emptiness and, frankly, irrelevance of much of the contemporary art world.

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