As 2013 came to an end, the art world took stock of its remarkable fortunes: Leading auction houses announced records for total sales, as new wealth and new collectors clamored for art and collectibles. For the fourth year in a row, Christie’s broke its own record, with more than $7 billion in sales. And they were still giddy from one day in November when they sold almost $700 million of art.

Included in that sale were a triptych by the Irish-born painter Francis Bacon, which sold for $142.4 million dollars (claimed to be the most expensive work of art ever sold at auction), and a Jeff Koons “Balloon Dog,” which sold for $58.4 million (the highest price paid for a work by a living artist). Those were both new records, but with records shattered on a regular basis, they don’t mean much anymore.
Magazines that cater to the business-minded and the super wealthy parsed the details of the sale and what it meant for investors. Some worried about speculation and a market bubble. Bloomberg News put the sale into global context: “Collectors are bidding up art prices as easy-money policies among central banks and rising global stock markets boost the fortunes of the world’s richest people.”

And the critics, once again, bristled at writing yet another story about yet another epic sale. Jed Perl of the New Republic wrote: “At Christie’s and Sotheby’s some of the wealthiest members of society, the people who can’t believe in anything until it’s been monetized, are trashing one of our last hopes for transcendence.” Peter Schjeldahl of the New Yorker said that for a critic to argue about the insane prices being paid today for art would be to “don a clown costume and to join the circus,” but he put on the costume long enough to note that, “the present art market plainly won’t quit until it hits the end of the line,” which he defined as “psychosis” and “ruinous passion.”

Going back as far as the Renaissance, artists have had an uneasy relationship to patrons and the money they offer. And the fear of mass commercialization has been a perennial theme of art at least since the days of the pop artists a half century ago. But something different is in the air today. The level of disgust is deeper and more visceral. The art world has collapsed into the world of commerce, and while there may be celebrations at Christie’s, there is an almost apocalyptic level of gloom everywhere else.

**The trouble with forgery**

There are two basic critical responses to today’s art market. One argues that the market has nothing to do with art, and that whatever happens in the market is irrelevant to the actual content, meaning and love of art. Art is to the art market as sailing is to the business of hawking mega-yachts to multibillionaires. The other view, succinctly stated by Perl, is more pessimistic: The art market is ruining art, spiritually and as a cultural practice. In this understanding, the mega-yachts have taken over the bay and are crushing the finely wrought vintage sailing vessels beneath their hulking super-tonnage.

Both are true, in a way. If you retreat to certain museums that have kept their independence and stayed true to their values, it is still possible to tune out the noise of the market. But Perl is right, too, because the market isn’t just a distracting din of biennials and art fairs and blaring headlines about new record prices. The market is corrupting art, determining the kinds of art that get made and sold, changing the topics of art and ultimately controlling its future. In the worse case, it is also corrupting artists themselves, enticing them and rewarding them for bad, meretricious and superficial art.

Perhaps the biggest impact, however, is on the stories we tell about art, and today the only stories we seem to be telling are stories about the market for art.

A recently published overview of the art market by Michael Findlay, an art dealer and director of the Acquavella Gallery in New York, locates the shift to a market-dominated discourse about a decade ago: “By the turn of the century the language of money had become the lingua franca of
the art world and the entry point for many new collectors.” As a longtime dealer, Findlay isn’t averse to the commerce of art. But in his 2012 book, “The Value of Art,” he sees a striking problem with the rampant worship of mammon today: “In such an atmosphere, why should one ‘original’ painting or object have to be different from another, and why should they have to be handmade by a particular individual?”

His comment goes to the heart of two of the most fundamental pieties of the art world: that art be original and authentic. And one of the strangest things about the current cultural moment is how many people are questioning both of these assumptions.

When Andy Warhol made sculpture from silk-screened replicas of Brillo boxes, he seemed to be teasing at the possibly nonexistent line between art and commodity; but the art world isn’t so sure about whether British artist Damien Hirst’s mass-produced “spot” paintings — grids of colored spots manufactured by a team of assistants — are anything other than mass-produced objects. “Even art market professionals like myself don’t know the exact count, said one Christie’s specialist of the proliferation of Hirst’s paintings, in a New York Times story last June. And yet they sell.

Forgery has also become one of today’s central art narratives, a subject of morbid fascination because of its power to unsettle and undermine the commerce in art. Responding to recent forgery scandals, critic Blake Gopnik (formerly of The Washington Post) wrote in the New York Times: “We may also want to bless forgers for helping to tame our absurd art market. If speculators eventually are scared off by the danger of being stuck with fakes, prices may fall.”

The idealization of forgery goes well beyond any wishful thinking about imploding the art market bubble. Books about forgers and forgery proliferate, from “Caveat Emptor: The Secret Life of an American Art Forger” in 2012 to the recently published “Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age.” The former is a confessional romp in which forger Ken Perenyi presents his trade as an amoral analogue to the study and analysis of great art. The latter is a philosophical take by critic Jonathon Keats on some of the most fascinating forgery scandals in history. Keats’s book is also an analysis of the relation of art to authenticity over the ages, suggesting that forgery, done well, can be more compelling than the art made by “real artists” in a sick art world: “art forgeries achieve what legitimate art accomplishes when legitimate art is most effective, provoking us to asking agitating questions about ourselves and the world.”

Thus the fascination with forgery reveals a deeper desire: to divorce the experience of art from the things that make the trade in art possible — the power of the artist’s name, our social investment in genius, our certainty in the provenance and authenticity of the artwork.

**Dealing with the new reality**

Forgery emerges as a fantasy — embraced now by serious critics — because it is disruptive. And being disruptive is the sort of thing that genuine art was supposed to do, until it became too closely associated with the new economy of endlessly proliferating markets and soaring economic inequity, changes that make many people today deeply fretful, not just about their futures, but about the future of humanity. Perl’s anguish about the recent round of eight- and
nine-figure art auctions relates the art market to larger disillusionment with how we have structured the economy: “With the middle class in disarray, art is no longer embraced as anything close to an ideal,” he wrote. “Art is just another hope to be abandoned, along with the hope that your children might do better than you’ve done.”

Nick Paumgarten, in a profile of the powerful art dealer David Zwirner published recently in the New Yorker, chronicled similar fears: “You meet a lot of people in the art world who are exhausted and dismayed by the focus on money, and by its dominance,” he wrote in a much-discussed anthropological survey of high-end art society. “It distracts from the work, they say. It distorts curatorial instincts, critical appraisals, and young artists’ careers. It scares away civilians, who begin to lump art in with other symptoms of excess and dismiss it as another garish plaything of the rich.”

One prominent art blogger, Lee Rosenbaum, finds the gnashing of teeth among critics to be silly: “Art costs money. The most sought-after art is incredibly expensive. You and I can’t afford it. Get over it.” From this perspective one might say, “Just stay focused on the art. Don’t think about the money.” And it’s worth remembering how much resentment — class-based resentment — affects what critics write.

It would be easier to maintain Rosenbaum’s “get over it” attitude if art itself didn’t seem obsessed with economic issues. We live in an economy that prizes mobility, highly skilled freelance labor and wide, loose, elite networks of cosmopolitan individual agents. It is an economy that rewards some people handsomely, yet leaves an inestimable amount of human wreckage in its wake. A quick survey of New York galleries suggests that this new economy is haunting artists, who are torn between chronicling the chaos or surfing above it, between social critique or cool, cryptic work that celebrates their own prestige and participation in the elite economy.

Some of them survey the road kill of the new economy: Trash from the alley and toys from the attic are mashed up into queasy phantasmagoria of hybrid animals and machines and sickly cyborg humanoids, as if we are already wandering around in the post-apocalyptic ruins of the 9-to-5 world of work, faith and family.

Others focus on the surreal, hypnotic glamour of airports, the Internet and global commerce. In her recently published book “Forgetting the Art World,” Pamela M. Lee gives us this definition of art world membership: Scholar and artist “Miwon Kwon put it best when she observed that one’s citizenship in the art world was measured by the number of frequent flyer miles chalked up in the service of the profession.”

A lot of this art isn’t very interesting, and much of it is definitely repetitious. And so other artists avoid the issue as best they can, through escapism into a world of pure silliness, pop-culture trash or pure abstraction.

There lingers in some corners of the art world the conviction — more like a desperate article of faith — that art can still redeem itself, through mockery, satire and irony. Thus, artists such as Koons and Hirst are somehow satirizing or critiquing the market that makes them wealthy. But
more and more there is despair, a sense that they aren’t joking their way out of anything, just sneering all the way to the bank. There is no “outside” to the market from which artists can observe and comment independently.

Even museums are sucked into the vortex of money, celebrity and commerce. After the record-breaking sale that made the Francis Bacon triptych the most talked-of painting in the world, the Portland Art Museum in Oregon announced it would display the work through March 30. How could it not, given that the only stories we tell about art are stories about money and commerce? And how could the anonymous buyer of the work resist the opportunity to display it, given that he may have been able to write off the sales tax by shipping it out of state for display? Oregon Public Radio estimated that windfall as worth potentially $11 million, enough to buy another eight-figure work of art. It’s a win-win for everyone. But not for art, if there is such a thing anymore.