INVESSE 2

Undercover in the art world: what I found out working for dealers

March 11 | 2024

times2

Wouldn't we all be workaholics if the pay cheque were big enough? **Kevin Maher**

that "rewards unhealthy" work

hours on the job. Elba illustrated

a production where he'd worked

shooting underwater sequences.

Bloody hell. Poor guy. And he

I should probably, at this point.

Elsewhere workaholism also

has an unhelpful "crutch" quality

that can, if improperly deployed,

otherwise belongs to personal

responsibility. Meaning? In the

John Galliano (High & Low: John

new documentary about the

Galliano), a subtle defence is

constructed to explain how, in

2010, Galliano was filmed in a

imprecations at Jewish diners.

The defence? Workaholism

Galliano was churning out

32 collections a year. It could

happen to anyone. You know?

exhausted. Clearly, it's time to

unleash some antisemitic abuse.

himself, yet, as the

Edward's imposter

Perhaps fearing that

syndrome story might

lull the nation into a

coma, the royals also

dropped, on Mother's

Princess of Wales, who

hasn't been seen in any

official capacity since

undergoing abdominal

picture, featuring a

seated, smiling Kate.

surrounded by her

beaming children,

George, Charlotte

designed to quell

some of the nuttier

and Louis, was clearly

Day morning, a

photograph of the

official Duke of

Edinburgh.

You're overworked. You're utterly

Parisian bar, hurling antisemitic

disgraced fashion designer

only gets \$8 million for that?

refer him to my hypothetical

rubbish collector buddy.

bear the moral weight that

habits and "normalises" long

his complaint by referring to

for ten days straight while

nought experiment. You know the guy (it's usually a guy) who drags your rubbish bin to the back

of the lorry, and hooks it on the tipper thing, then presses the button and watches as the whole contraption flicks upwards and dumps several squashed black bin bags into a stinking morass of household detritus Well, can you picture him saying, "Me? I'm all about the rubbish. I'm actually a workaholic"?

No? Didn't think so. Yet workaholism is becoming increasingly widespread. It's an addiction as seemingly lethal as alcoholism and drug dependency that can consume anyone, from highly paid top-tier professionals in the creative, academic and financial industries right down to lowly rubbish collectors (see thought experiment above).

The self-confessed workaholic and successful playwright James Graham, the writer of the BBC drama Sherwood, recently revealed that he had been diagnosed with workaholism more than a decade ago, at a time when he was waking up early. skipping meals and getting all his "happiness and joy" from work (see thought experiment).

The Luther star Idris Elba also revealed recently that he had started therapy in an attempt to cope with his workaholism. Elba, who was paid \$8 million for playing the villain in the action flick Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw, claimed that the entertainment industry is a place

A princess breaks cover

After weeks of royal illnesses, operations, idiotic rumours and asinine counter rumours, the Duke of Edinburgh has attempted a belated. lunge at the ailment limelight. The 60-yearold prince, formerly known as Edward, revealed at the weekend that he is suffering from a serious case of, oh sweet Lord give us patience

'imposter syndrome". Yep, apparently since being granted the dukedom on his 59th birthday (and all he wanted was a new phone) Edward has found it "just the weirdest and strangest feeling. You walk into a room and, particularly still today, there are name places on a card and I still look around going, 'Yes, but where am I sitting?" There's a punchline there, obviously, that features disgruntled party hosts hastily scribbling a name place with "Edward", but really he just means that he doesn't recognise



It doesn't, of course, help my aundiced view of workaholism that I've spent decades interviewing ridiculously overpaid Hollywood stars who, like Elba, claim to be "victims" of a system that requires them to leap from job to job, without breaks, for fear of falling out of the creative conversation. I can't tell you the number of times that I've had to suppress volcanic levels of laugher when faced with an actor who's explaining how he had to fly from, say, an action movie in Australia directly onto the New York set of a serious melodrama, with no time off to recover" artistically from the previous character. It's just straight into the new role and the "harrowing" demands of full creative immersion. I normally just nod wisely at this point while deciding that, since it qualifies as a genuine crime against humanity, he should probably take it up with the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

And I'm not letting myself off the hook either. I have been known to burn the candle so brightly at the work end that the other end becomes a lifeless wick. Yet when I find myself overworking I recognise that, as Americans say, it's fully "on me" It's not an addiction that requires external intervention. Or maybe I'm not being paid enough?

Thought experiment. You pay me and my hypothetical rubbish collector \$8 million for doing our jobs, but with no breaks, and seven days a week. Then ask us if we believe that workaholism is real. What would we sav? "We're working on it.

speculation that has recently flooded the internet. Although, and I'm just going to say it, thanks to the careful framing, Kate's arms are hidden, meaning that we cannot see that they have been replaced, during surgery, with bionic limbs from North Korea. Plus. parts of Kate are in shadow. surgery in January. The meaning the newly installed AI-operated central processing unit also remains, typically, undercover. Still, the kids look happy. And why wouldn't they? They've got robo-mum for Mother's Day.

Drug-fuelled, immoral. obsessed with social status: the art world was all that and more. **Bianca Bosker** tells Daniel Bates

n artwork is "placed", never sold. Websites are "online viewing rooms" and a piece is not "boring", it is "durational", says Bianca Bosker with a laugh from her apartment in Manhattan. These are some of the rules the 37-year-old writer learnt while infiltrating the art world in

New York. Bosker went undercover for five years as an assistant to ritzy New York art dealers. The result is a book. Get the Picture: A Mind-Bending Journey among the Inspired Artists and Obsessive Art Fiends Who Taught Me How to See, which was published last month in the US and is causing quite the stir

Darkly funny, it has been hailed by critics as a gonzo-style industry takedown. It reads as if Louis Theroux spent one of his Weird Weekends in Manhattan with the head of the Museum of Modern Art.

From her vantage point of lowly assistant, Bosker exposes a world that is at times drug-fuelled, immoral, fraudulent ("We're all white collar criminals," remarked one gallerist gleefully, revealing he paid no sales tax) and often dispiriting. It is an industry. Bosker reveals, in which the artist can end up sidelined. only seeing a tiny fraction of the vast riches their artwork can command. It's not all doom and gloom. The book is also delightfully absurd, skewering the elite

"I spoke with an ex-Gagosian employee who said she received thorough coaching on how to answer the phones. She was told to record herself rehearsing the word 'Gagosian and she had to say it with a slight downward inflection. You didn't want to sound happy but you don't want to sound dead," she says.

Why take on the art world, I ask. Bosker's curiosity was partly personal. As a child she was an avid painter, but lost interest in art as she got older. When she walked into a gallery it felt like "everyone else was getting the punchline apart from me". As a journalist — she is a

contributor at The Atlantic — she wanted to write about the art scene, but when she started asking questions the pushback from insiders only intrigued her. "Some people flat out refused to speak to me. Others made clear if I wrote anything they disagreed with, there would be hell to pay



If the right person bought a piece, it would add gravitas

Instead, Bosker adopted an immersive method of journalism. In that respect, she had form: she had written a previous book. Cork Dork, on the world of fine wine, for which she trained to become a sommelier, and that became a New York Times bestseller. This time round, it would be a much deeper dive. Her quest began in 2018 in the same way as that of countless others trying to break into the art world in New York: begging for a job.

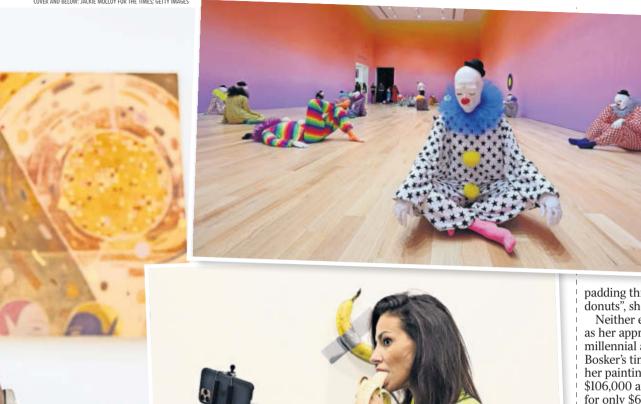
She was open about being a journalist. After dozens of rejections, Jack Barrett, the owner of the fashionable 315 Gallery in downtown Brooklyn, agreed to let her be his assistant. Seen as a champion of underground art in New York, Barrett had an air of cultivated cool. He mocked Bosker's clothes. "An all-black wardrobe was considered boring,' Bosker says. Not that his baseball cap, sweater and jeans combination was trailblazing, but it adhered to an unwritten dress code. For an opening at Gagosian, on the Upper East Side "people tend to be as shimmery as

baby dolphins". Bosker writes Meanwhile, the aesthetic in Brooklyn would be "tattoos, beanies, hoodies, patchy dye jobs that made people look like their mums had grounded them before they could finish the job. Asymmetrical haircuts, ironic tube socks — it's artfully unkempt.

Rules mattered, Barrett taught her. Not just anyone with money could buy a piece of art. Sure, they could inquire and their name might be added to a waitlist, never again to see the light of day. Instead, the currency of the art market was social cachet. If the right person bought a piece, it would add gravitas to the artwork and increase the status of other works by the artist. "It's about placing a work with

individuals who have clout and connections within the art world They might own work by other prominent artists or sit on museum boards, or are viewed as influencers. Gallerists and dealers make it their business to gather that sort of intelligence. Bosker savs. If vou're a "Joe Schmo", as it's put to her, and you want an artwork, chances are you'll just have to wait for an auction and stick your paddle in the air the longest, paying over the odds

My wild ride selling art in the elite galleries



branched out exploring the outer reaches of the performance art scene. At one opening she watched a middle aged man in a Snow White costume climb halfway up a vas metal sheet and mumble somethin about a trapped animatronic goa into a microphone At a gallery called Catbox Contemporary she observed a "scrotal hairless cat

padding through a bathtub of frosted donuts" she writes.

Neither experience was as troubling as her apprenticeship with the talented millennial artist Julie Curtiss. During Bosker's time as Curtiss's assistant, her painting Princess was sold for \$106,000 at auction, after being sold for only \$600 two years earlier

Curtiss didn't see a penny of the resale value of her work. "Some galleries do write in clauses to preven buyers from flipping the work within a certain amount of time, or stating that when a buyer sells they have to give some per cent back to the artist Bosker says. That may apply to that first resale, but it's not going to refer to the resales down the line

The result is that "artists are having to make difficult decisions over their healthcare while watching people get rich off their work", she says. Another of Curtiss's works. Pas Du Trois, went the same way — and sold at Christie's for \$423,000, prompting Curtiss to fear she was in a bubble that could prematurely end her young career.

A baffling contradiction in the art world is that success can be an artist's undoing. Bridget Donahue, who ran an ultra-hip gallery on the Lower East Side, put it to Bosker succinctly: curators consider it "gross" if somebody is too commercially successful. Ergo, even when you win vou can't win. For Bosker, it was time to cash out on her undercover stint

Not that she intends the book to be a downer. Ouite the opposite "To me there was something empowering about understanding that the alienation I felt from the art world wasn't unique," she says. "Understanding how these mechanisms get put into play and why helped me at least be able to engage with art on my own terms."

The next few weeks will be taken up by Bosker's book tour with stops in Los Angeles, Miami and New York but the reception from the art world may make it more eventful than most She savs: "I did have one art journalist read the book and when I mentioned I was going on tour, his response was: 'Are you bringing a bodyguard? Get the Picture by Bianca Bosker (Atlantic £20). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

Bianca Bosker, Below: Rande Gerber and Cindy Crawford at the 2023 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach, an art fair that Bosker attended. Above right, from top: Vocabulary of Solitude by Ugo Rondinone at the 2017 fair; **Comedian by Maurizio** Cattelan in 2019

Bosker lasted five months with Barrett before fleeing to Manhattan where she was taken on by Denny Gallery, the Tribeca gallery owned by Elizabeth Denny and Rob Dimin. She arrived as they were preparing for Art Basel, the fair in Miami where \$3 billion of art is put up for sale over a frantic and debauched four days.

Refreshingly, Denny and Dimin vere candid with Bosker and told her that putting on a show at Untitled, a rival art fair to Art Basel, would cost them \$39,000, the cost of running their gallery for a month. They planned to bring 20 abstract photos by the visual artist Erin O'Keefe to Miami and had to sell 13 of them, or \$70,000, to make it worth their while.

In her book, Bosker records Dimin as saying: "We need to crush Miami and make a shit ton of money." Luckily they did, with Dimin selling the first piece within 19 minutes of the fair opening and even Bosker managing to hawk \$50,000 over the course of the four days.

> It was a wild time. Miami was just this bacchanal held in the name of shopping for art." she savs. "After dinner one night my Uber was nearly stolen by a woman called Poodle. I went to a party at a useum, a party at

someone's house on a private island. then to Soho House where an insane mass of humanity was trying to get in, as if Miami was flooding and Soho House was the last boat. En route to Soho House I was on the phone selling a piece of artwork for thousands of dollars while people were snorting lines of cocaine next to me."

At one party sponsored by Christian Louboutin, a gallerist from New York laughed in Bosker's face at her Art Basel VIP pass and said "That's worthless."

Schmoozing millionaires was tiring work. She met Beth Rudin DeWoody, the art patron born into a New York real estate fortune who began collecting at the age of 12 and who owned so much art she had filled a former munitions depot in Miam with it (she had run out of space to hang pictures in her New York apartment, her apartments in Los Angeles and her three homes in Palm Beach).

The notion of collectors hoarding artworks rankles. "There is something tragic about these amazing artworks that aren't able to see the light of day," she says. And yet, ethical buyers champion artists too. "While some people are stockpiling Warhols, there are some collectors who make a point of trying to collect the work of emerging artists because they feel

they want to support their practice. Not every artwork can be hung

of course — and in time Bosker had

times2