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ART IN A COMMERCIAL WORLD

This chapter presents an overview of contributions from different academic disciplines that have been investigating the special role of art in our society. The excerpts highlight some recurrent themes and issues manifested throughout the larger narrative framework of this volume. Taken together, these multidisciplinary perspectives yield important new insights, enriching our understanding of a topic traditionally considered to be the purview of art historians: the production of art.

The excerpts included in section I condense long-standing philosophical arguments about art's essentially disinterested nature and its relation to the market. The art historical tendency to study art outside of the marketplace can be traced to the man who is widely considered the father of the discipline, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, in the eighteenth century. In his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1755), Winckelmann argued that a money-oriented society distorts artistic practice. This argument was continued by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1790. Kant insisted that only art that has been created freely—that is, through play—can be considered art. Art that is the product of labor and made for monetary considerations he relegated to the category of craft: mercenary art. Generally speaking, Kant maintained, the creation of beautiful things can only take place in an aristocratic realm as opposed to a commercial realm. A similar argument was made by the German philosopher Friedrich Schiller a few years later. Schiller too believed that true art can only result from the innate drive to play and that the artist should refrain from any focus on fortune or the needs of daily life. As Paul Mattick points out in “Illusions of Disinterest,” it was Schiller who

firmly established the notion that art's production differs from all other production in its freedom from the market.

The need for "true" art to be the product of play, not work, is expressed in Karl Marx's writings on art as well, limited as they were. The art historian O. K. Werckmeister, teasing out Marx's convictions from various passages, shows that Marx believed that true art can only be created using an individual's innate talent. He deplored the professionalization of artists. In a communist society, Marx wrote, there will be no painters, but at most individuals who, among other things, paint.

Clement Greenberg, the influential mid-twentieth-century Marxist American writer and art critic, builds on Kant's ideas and further theorizes the distinction between art produced for a market and the art of the twentieth-century avant-garde in his 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Arthur Danto introduces a new way to define the art of the twentieth century within the realm of aesthetic theory and philosophy, recognizing that much of the art produced by the avant-garde did not fit traditional aesthetic criteria. Last, Theodor Adorno explores the threat mass-produced culture poses to societal well-being and high art.

The excerpts in section II tackle the thorny issue of what endows art with value. The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff uses his observations across different cultures to show how societies assign exceptional value to certain objects, whether they hold intrinsic value or not, such as artworks. Walter Benjamin conjectures that the value of the original work of art lies in its particular location in both time and space and defined it as aura. The cultural economist Michael Hutter and the philosopher Richard Shusterman enumerate the values that aesthetic theories have assigned to art outside of the commercial realm. The sociologists Pierre Bourdieu, Raymonde Moulin, and Olav Velthuis use observations from the field to theorize how value is established in a work of art and communicated. Jean Baudrillard, the philosopher and sociologist, offers a critique of art in a postmodern society from a poststructuralist perspective, highlighting its increasing insistence on uselessness.

I. ART IN SOCIETY

PAUL MATTICK, ILLUSIONS OF DISINTEREST

Excerpt (pp. 40–45) from "Illusions of Disinterest," in *Art in Its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 39–46. Copyright © 2003 Routledge. Reproduced with permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.

In Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works* (1755/1987), the historical distance between ancient and modern appears intermittently as a fall from grace, in which the corrupting effect of a commercial economy plays a central role. Explaining the special access of the ancient Greeks to "good taste," for instance, Winckelmann emphasizes the role played by the classical gymnasium as a school of art, where (thanks to the absence

of “our present-day criteria of respectability”) “natural beauty revealed itself naked for the instruction of the artist”:

The nude body in its most beautiful form was exhibited there in so many different, authentic, and noble positions and poses not obtainable today by the hired models in our academies.

Truth springs from inner sentiment, and the draughtsman who wants to impart truth to his academy studies cannot preserve even a shadow of it unless he himself is able to replace that which the unmoved and indifferent soul of his model does not feel or is unable to express by actions appropriate to a given sentiment or passion (13).

Here authenticity and nobility, embodied (ideally, at least) in the “inner sentiment” of the artist, are opposed to the gracelessness of the hired model, whose movements reflect not the free spirit of his personality but the requirements of his drawing-master employer. But the artist too suffers the distortions of the money-oriented society, for “an artist of our times . . . feels compelled to work more for bread than for honor” (55). Not only is his product at the mercy of its purchaser, who may choose to place it in positions quite unsuitable for proper viewing (61–69), but he is more or less required by the pressures of earning a livelihood to depend on the practical techniques he has picked up in his apprenticeship rather than engaging in the rigorous research into the principles of formal truth that allowed Michelangelo to come so near to the achievement of antiquity.

Winckelmann’s account of art is, to say the least, philosophically naive in comparison with Kant’s, but themes present in his work reappear in the *Third Critique*. For Kant (1790/1987) taste is not just ennobling and art not just an education in natural grace; the experience of beauty is in his system an essential element of the spiritual progress of humankind toward the realization of our rational nature. But the features in Kant’s eyes essential to the fine arts (as opposed to the merely “agreeable” arts, like table conversation and games) involve the familiar oppositions, not only to the “mechanical” or manual but also to effort performed for a monetary reward. The basic principle is that “we should not call anything art except a production through freedom, i.e. through a power of choice that bases its acts on reason” (170).

Kant also clearly distinguishes art from science, as it had not been distinguished two and even one hundred years earlier. Freedom implies, on the one hand, the absence of governance by rules, characteristic of science. Art is the product of the creative genius, for whom technical training and the imitation of the ancients serve to shape a soul that will spontaneously generate new forms. For “genius is the exemplary originality of a subject’s natural endowment in the free use of his cognitive powers” (186). The emphasis on an exercise of reason specific to the arts establishes their autonomy: they are to be guided not by demands external to their own formal natures but by principles internal to the sphere of art (Kant distinguishes “paintings properly so called,” which are “there merely to be looked at” from those “intended to teach us, e.g. history or natural science”) (193). On the other hand,

Art is likewise to be distinguished from *craft*. The first is also called *free art*, the second could be called *mercenary art*. We regard free art [as an art] that could only turn out purposive (i.e. succeed) if it is play, in other words, an occupation that is agreeable on its own account; mercenary art we regard as labor, i.e. as an occupation that on its own account is disagreeable (burdensome) and that attracts us only through its effect (e.g. pay) so that people can be coerced into it. (170–71)

This passage, not unrelated to the status preoccupations of eighteenth-century artists, evokes elements basic to Kant's theory of taste as "the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*" (53). The experience of beauty is the experience of an object as "purposive"—as having, we might say, the character of design—but without actually having a defined purpose for the viewer, who is caught up in no relation of action (including that of scientific cognizing) with it. Hence the object is a "free beauty," exemplifying design in the abstract and in principle representing nothing under a determinate concept; given Kant's (inter-) subjective conception of beauty, this reflects the fact that the viewer's judgment of taste can be considered free of any idea of functions which the object might serve for him or her and therefore involves "no concept [as to] what the object is [meant] to represent; our imagination is playing, as it were, while it contemplates the shape, and such a concept would only restrict its freedom" (77).

The concept of "interest" at work here includes both morality (we have an interest in the good) and the common eighteenth-century sense of that word which "centered on economic advantage as its core meaning" (Hirschman 1977, 32). The contemplative realm of the aesthetic is contrasted, therefore, with realms of action: that of the good, object of the Practical Reason, and that of the "agreeable" (pleasing to the senses) and of those things answering to "material" needs. (In the case of cooking, "only when their need has been satisfied can we tell who in a multitude of people has taste and who does not") (Kant 1790/1987, 52). Freedom, at least of the will, is essential to morality; the freedom of aesthetic play signifies the bracketing of material desire and so of the economic domain to which those desires look for satisfaction. Aesthetic appreciation requires neither ownership nor consumption, but only perception.

Kant's treatment of the nature of art involves a complex drawing together of many conceptual strands in the idea of freedom. The production of beautiful things must have an aristocratic character opposed to *labor*: "anything studied and painstaking must be avoided in art." The idea of "play" is central because it is the opposite of "work." And the concept of labor involved here is that of wage labor: art must be free in a double sense, including that "of not being a mercenary occupation and hence a kind of labor, whose magnitude can be judged, exacted, or paid for according to a determinate standard" and "the sense that, though the mind is occupying itself, yet it feels satisfied and aroused (independently of any pay) without looking to some other purpose" (190).

The aristocratic flavor of aesthetic experience is if anything more pronounced in Kant's doctrine of the sublime, the experience of the superiority of the reason to the imagination,

bound to the representation of empirical material. Like the experience of the beautiful, that of the sublime presupposes the satisfaction of material needs, in this case that for physical safety: “just as we cannot pass judgment on the beautiful if we are seized by inclination and appetite, so we cannot pass judgment at all on the sublime in nature if we are afraid.” But paradoxically physical safety allows us to respond (aesthetically, not practically) to the thrill of danger viewed and therefore “to regard as small the [objects] of our [natural] concerns: property, health, and life.” This appreciation of human response to aestheticized peril reflects the esteem given by society to a person “who does not yield to danger but promptly sets to work with vigor and full deliberation.” This character is best exemplified by the warrior, so that “no matter how much people may dispute, when they compare the statesman with the general, as to which one deserves the superior respect, an aesthetic judgment decides in favor of the general.” For “even war has something sublime about it,” whereas peace, in contrast, “tends to make prevalent a mere[ly] commercial spirit,” which brings with it “base selfishness, cowardice, and softness” (121–22). In such a passage we may recognize, in this student of Hume and Rousseau, the discourse of civic virtue and its decline under the influence of commerce—here to be countered by the transmutation of aristocratic (military) values into a spiritual principle.

Since work, as wage labor, is marked by the anti-artistic character of mercenary culture, it is not surprising that play will appear to incarnate the aesthetic impulse. It was in Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794/1986) that this theme received its fullest development at the end of the eighteenth century. For Schiller too “the character of our age” is established by way of “an astonishing contrast between contemporary forms of humanity and earlier ones, especially the Greek.” With the development of the division of labor, the unified human personality of the ancients has been split into fragments, so that “we see not merely individuals, but whole classes of men, developing but one part of their potentialities, while of the rest, as in stunted growths, only vestigial traces remain” (31, 33). When a society “insists on special skills being developed with a degree of intensity which is only commensurate with its readiness to absolve the individual citizen from developing himself in extensity—can we wonder that the remaining aptitudes of the psyche are neglected in order to give undivided attention to the one which will bring honor and profit?” (37). It is the task of art, expression of the drive to play, to reconstitute the fragmented human person, “to restore by means of a higher art the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed” (43).

If art is to be the instrument of humankind’s education and elevation to a more advanced order of social being, it must resist the characteristic forces of the present age. The artist must protect himself from the corruption of modernity: “Let him direct his gaze upwards, to the dignity of his calling and the universal Law, not downwards towards Fortune and the needs of daily life.” And he must seek an audience among people of similar temperament: “Those who know no other criterion of value than the effort of earning or the tangible profit, how should they be capable of appreciating the unobtrusive effect of taste on the outward appearance and on the mind and character of men?”

(57, 65). Taste, by fostering harmony in the individual, will bring harmony to society. Providing a spiritual experience of the physical world, it opens a realm of experience in which the interests of reason are reconciled with the interests of the senses. Art thus holds out the promise of a future happiness for humankind, but even under current conditions it provides “an ideal semblance which ennobles the reality of common day.” Taste, that is,

throws a veil of decorum over those physical desires which, in their naked form, affront the dignity of free beings; and by a delightful illusion of freedom, conceals from us our degrading kinship with matter. On the wings of taste even that art which must cringe for payment can lift itself out of the dust. (201, 219)

With these words, nearly the concluding ones of Schiller’s book, a conflict at the heart of the modern practice of art—that the commodity status of artworks hinges on their representation of an interest superior to that of mundane commerce—has achieved frank expression, if only in the form of the wistful hope that it can be overcome. Fundamental to this practice is the idea that art’s production differs from all other production in its freedom from the market. Hence art is like play, not work; hence, considered as work, it engages the whole person, not the fragmented laborer of today; hence it is a fully creative effort, not constrained by a mechanical process; hence it is “disinterested,” not aiming at the satisfaction of material needs. In reality, however, art’s rise to autonomous status itself involved the replacement of artistic work to the order of premodern patronage by production for the market. It is therefore not surprising that the “delightful illusion” of art’s separateness from the commercial culture which in fact produced it in its modern form has proved impossible to sustain, and that the history of this institution to the present day has seen artists alternate between claims to a higher calling and complaints of insufficient payment for their practice of it.

From the side of the consumer, the worship of art has expressed the claim of capitalist society’s higher orders to rise above the confines of commerce as worthy inheritors of the aristocratic culture of the past. Here, involvement with the autonomous artwork represents detachment from the claims of practical life, even while its ownership and enjoyment require both money and the time made possible by money and so signify financial success along with cultural superiority. It is indeed the new uses made of images, music, writing, and the rest—notably for the construction of a mode of sensibility characterized by distance from material necessity and so free to cultivate responsiveness to experience—that appear as the autonomy of art. Essential to this concept is not just the liberation of the arts from their former social functions but their conceptual separation from the everyday life under the sway of economic interest that the bourgeoisie in reality shares with its social inferiors, apart from those moments devoted to the detachment essential to the aesthetic attitude. In fact, the acquisition of the aesthetic attitude derives from and marks a position of privilege in the very realm of economics

from which that attitude officially declares its independence. And although the conception of art as transcendent of social reality provides a naturalist disguise for the actual historical process within which it came into existence and for the socio-economic prerequisites—leisure and education—of its enjoyment, the truth, as we have seen, will out. If Baudelaire was moved by the Salon of 1859 to compare poetry and progress to “two ambitious men who hate one another with an instinctive hatred,” it was the same poet who had addressed his criticism of the Salon of 1846 “To the Bourgeois”: “for as not one of you today can do without power, so not one of you has the right to do without poetry.”

O. K. WERCKMEISTER, MARX ON IDEOLOGY AND ART

Excerpts (pp. 501–9) from “Marx on Ideology and Art,” *New Literary History* 4, no. 3 (1973): 501–19. Reprinted by kind permission of the author.

Marx concerned himself with the history and theory of art only at the beginning of his career. In 1841 and 1842 he wrote short polemical treatises on art directed against Hegel, which are now lost. He never wrote a theoretical or historical text that dealt with art as an issue after that. Neither did Engels. Both repeatedly commented on questions of literature, but not on the visual arts and architecture, or on art as a generalized concept of philosophical aesthetics. Hence the place of art in later Marxist theory of history and society remains uncertain. Official Soviet scholarship has tried to fill the gap by abstracting any one of Marx’s and Engels’ scattered and casual remarks on art and literature from the context of their numerous writings, and systematically compiling them into two huge volumes entitled *On Art and Literature*. [. . .] On the other hand, scholars in capitalist states have concluded that if Marx, in his sustained effort to substantiate his theory of history and society through decades of methodical research, never returned to his early interest in aesthetics, he must have considered that art did not form any part of the primary material in which the historical progress towards a socialist future could be traced. [. . .]

The discussion is inevitably thrown back at the few short text passages, quoted and interpreted time and again, where Marx directly comments about art, referring to historical examples. Two apparently contradictory notions of art, one idealistic–utopian, the other historical–deterministic, seem to emerge from them. Are they just aspects of a dialectically ambivalent conception which is consistent in the final analysis, as official communist aesthetics maintains, or are they in fact so irreconcilable as to defy the formation of a coherent aesthetic theory?

The idealistic notion of art in Marx’s thought may be deduced from the famous passage on the art of the Greeks, contained in the draft for the *Critique of Political Economics* (1857–58).

It is known that certain heydays of art are not at all related to the general development of society, and neither, therefore, to the skeleton, as it were, of its organization. For example

the Greeks, compared to the moderns, or also Shakespeare. Of certain art forms, the epics for example, it has even been recognized that they can never be produced in their epochal, classical shape when art production as such occurs; and that consequently within the realm of art itself certain important creations are only possible on the basis of an undeveloped stage in the development of art. If this is the case with regard to the relationship of the various art genres within the realm of art itself, it is already less striking that it should be the case with regard to the relationship of the realm of art as a whole to the general development of society. The difficulty consists only in the generalization of these contradictions. As soon as they are specified, they are already explained.

Marx then poses the notorious problem that past works of art like those of the Greeks continue to be appreciated with immediacy under social conditions that are advanced beyond those under which they themselves were made:

. . . the difficulty is not to understand that Greek art and epics are tied to certain stages in the development of society. The difficulty is that they still yield artistic pleasure to us, and in a certain way count for a norm and for unattainable models.

Marx proposes to solve the difficulty with an analogy between the organic development of the human individual and the history of mankind as a whole, which he similarly conceives of as a straightforward “evolution.” In this scheme, the historical epoch of the Greeks takes the place of infancy, and their works of art express this stage.

Why should the historical infancy of mankind where it is unfolded most beautifully, not exert an eternal fascination, as a stage that will never return? There are rude children and precocious children. Many of the ancient peoples belong in this category. The Greeks were normal children. The fascination of their art for us does not stand in contradiction with the undeveloped stage of society from which it grew. On the contrary, it is the result of this stage and is inseparably linked to the fact that the immature social conditions under which it came about, and only could come about, can never return.

It is well known that Marx derived this notion of Greek art as “epochal” and “classical” from German idealist philosophy, especially from Hegel. The idea of classical art, which implies that the ideal of artistic perfection has once been realized at a historical moment of the past, comes into conflict with Marx’s emphatically evolutionary view of history. Man’s production of his life, his dominion over nature through the social organization of his work, inexorably progresses towards higher stages, but in art the highest stage was reached early, and has never been attained again. On the contrary, in the more developed stages of society it can no longer be made to perfection. Then, there is only “art production,” that is, art produced in accordance with organized, feudally repressed or capitalistically alienated conditions of life. “Art,” which is opposed to “art production,” is related

to that notion of humanity which, far from being perfected in the progressing social organization of production, is on the contrary debased by it. Thus, “art production” is no longer true to human nature. Yet the art of the Greeks is perfect, although their society was far from being so. Communist commentators recognize that this thesis would contradict Marx’s and Engels’ general assumption that the cultural “superstructure” is determined by the economic “base.” They try to reconcile the contradiction by upgrading the Greek city of antiquity with its plebiscitary democracy as an analogous political ideal which could not be maintained in later stages of history. But for Marx the material basis resides in economic production, not in political organization. He never declares the “slaveholder” society of ancient Greece as anything of an ideal for human society in general, the way he here declares Greek art as an ideal for art in general. The point of his text is to state that such a correlation does not appear to exist, either in the historical situation of Greek art, or in the theoretical notion of a perfect art that can be derived from it.

Already in the notes and excerpts which Marx prepared for his article “On Religious Art” (1842), now lost, he implicitly defines the realism of Greek art as a true expression of human nature. He opposes it to religion, thereby radicalizing Hegel’s distinction of both as parallel if subsequent forms of human consciousness. Those excerpts from the writings of idealist art historians elaborate on the theory that art in the service of religion is alienated from its ideal quality, which is human realism; religious art of ancient and medieval civilizations, they say, distorts human images into those of fictitious gods, deforming their natural features into the terrorizing expression of idols by which submission of believers is enforced. The essential quality of art appears to be sacrificed to its religious function, which in turn is nothing but a means for kings and priests to maintain authority over their people. The insincere relationship of religious art to its manifest contents in these early excerpts is the same as that of ideology to its contents in Marx’s later writings. On the basis of his readings, the young Marx must have thought that such a relationship contradicts the basic definition of art, which for him meant the undistorted revelation of true human nature. This contradiction is carried over into the opposition between “art” and “art production” in the later text of 1858.

Marx’s early confrontation between art and religion hinges on the term “fetishism.” It denotes the use of human images contrary to their true meaning, as fictitious deities, tools for dominating men. In Marx’s later economic theory, the same term denotes the transformation of the products of human labor into commodity form, contrary to their genuine purpose of serving the needs of men’s lives. Art, according to Marx’s original conception, is by implication free of any social purpose, an object of contemplation or enjoyment, perhaps in line with Kant’s definition of disinterested aesthetic experience. On this assumption, any art which becomes part of culture and is thereby ultimately produced by and for society, runs the danger of being estranged from its essence. Marx sustained this conception in his later philosophical writings, where he set out to demonstrate that any and all products of culture are dependent on the socially organized “base” of material production. Now he subsumed art, together with “morals, religion, metaphysics,” under the

term “ideology,” as one of the “fog formations in the brains of men.” All of them are made to appear autonomous in relation to the primary, material production of life, while in fact serving its social organization. Marx’s still later text on the art of the Greeks is consistent with this view, yet sets art apart from the other products of ideology. Whereas religion, law, and philosophy in its traditional understanding, are exclusively and adequately defined by the socially conditioned dependence of ideology on its material base, art maintains an essence of its own, from which it appears perennially estranged by its recurrent ideological functions throughout history. The art of the Greeks is the one historical example where this essence can be contemplated in its purity, since it appears exempt from the normal ideological relationship to its economic base. It thus provides an Archimedean point from which to judge most later art as untrue to its own essence. The most extreme judgment is to denounce capitalist society as a whole as detrimental to art. If man’s estranged relationship to nature under capitalism is given as a reason for this verdict, it becomes clear how much it depends on the idealist conception of an art that captures the essence of nature.

The text presents obvious difficulties for purposes of formulating a “Marxist” theory of art. It projects the essence of art back into a past historical ideal which cannot be recaptured, and thus keeps it apart from the ideal of human emancipation as a task of conscious historical progress towards the future. The ideal of art also cannot easily be projected into an emancipated society of the future if its definition implies that it should not be affected by social organization and function. As for the “art production” of the past, it completely escapes the correlation of art and truth, the ultimate aim of any philosophical aesthetics. It can only be subjected to a historical critique.

A text from *The German Ideology* (1845) shows that Marx could project the Archimedean point, from which to criticize “art production” with its ideological dependence on organized society, into the utopian future as well as into the classical past.

Raphael, as well as any other artist, was conditioned by the technical advances of art which had been made before him, by the organization of society and the division of labor in his locality, and finally, by the division of labor in all the countries with which his locality was in communication. Whether an individual like Raphael develops his talent depends entirely upon demand, which in turn depends upon the division of labor and the educational conditions of men which result from it. . . . The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in single individuals and its suppression in the broad mass of people which this entails is a consequence of the division of labor. . . . With a communist organization of society, there ceases, in any event, the subsumption of the artist under local and national limitations, which ensues solely from the division of labor, and there ceases the subsumption of the individual under one determined art, whereby he is exclusively a painter, a sculptor, etc., and already his designation sufficiently expresses the limitation of his commercial career and his dependence on the division of labor. In a communist society, there are no painters, but at most men who, among other things, also paint.

The close relationship of this text to the much later one on the art of the Greeks is an indication of how consistent Marx's conception of art remained. Already here, professional "art production" is denounced as a deviation from the human potential of art itself, because it is adapted to the needs and conditions of a working society whose organization is detrimental to the nature of man. It is opposed to "talent" as a natural human capacity, which has to be emancipated from professionalization in order to be practiced according to its essence. This amounts to an emancipation from social organization as such.

In the later text, Marx acclaims Greek art as a classical ideal for similar reasons: because it is not limited by its social base, and because it directly expresses human nature. Both these texts, spanning thirteen years of Marx's writing, are the idealistic and the utopian versions of the same sweeping judgment on art as socially motivated and organized work. By implication they declare the entire past history of European art an alienated activity. This is in line with other, even more sweeping statements about art as just another brand of ideology. With regard to the socialist society of the future, the text from *The German Ideology* virtually calls for the cancellation of "art production," along with alienated work in general. Art as a basic human activity, free from any socially determined function, and according to the freely developed potential of human nature, will continue to be practiced. But its content, its purpose, and the conditions of its existence are difficult to envisage in terms of any art we know, with its inevitable integration into society. Conditions under which virtually everyone can become active as an artist, yet no one will be limited to artistic activity alone, are reminiscent of that generalized aesthetic state of being which according to Kant and Schiller is to characterize the behavior of emancipated man whose nature and freedom coincide. Marx converts this anthropological construction of idealist aesthetics into a materialist if utopian perspective for the historical future. It is so radical that it cannot but invoke the idea of the end of art according to its past definition, with its inevitable aspect of socially useful work. That idea had already been formulated by Hegel when he conceived of a stage of human intellectual emancipation for which art is no longer an adequate means of objective communication. It is an idea incessantly pondered and finally rejected by contemporary German dialectical philosophers who follow Hegel and Marx.

Looking back on the art that did and does exist, the philosopher's task, according to Marx, will be to point out its constant estrangement from its ideal or utopian perfection. He will demonstrate that the "semblance of autonomy" projected into ideological products is by definition a fictitious one. As an exception, the notion of an autonomy of art is not fictitious; on the contrary, it is fundamental for both the art of the Greeks and the art spontaneously created by the emancipated individuals of the future. But history shows art tangled in ideological concerns. Time and again, it can be shown how the semblance of its autonomy under these conditions was in fact contrived to serve particular interests of socially organized material production. This is the historian's task. "We know only a single science, the science of history," wrote Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. It

is an all-comprehensive science which will endeavor to relate every human activity or product to the socially organized material conditions of men's lives. The historical investigation of art, like that of any other human product, is bound to go beyond its confines and to reach the basis of these conditions. Taken by itself, art has not even a history of its own. Marx and Engels insist that the only viable method of demonstrating the all-embracing historical context is "empirical observation." They oppose it to philosophy, which "through the historical representation of reality loses its medium of existence" as an autonomous discipline. Theory is thus reduced to "a synthesis of the most general results . . . which may be abstracted from the observation of man's historical development." However justified such a radical confidence in empirical knowledge of reality may be, taken on its own terms it leads only to one conclusion: there can be no science which explains human products in any other than a historical way, much less an autonomous philosophical discipline about such products. As far as art is concerned, there can be no aesthetics. Abstraction is Marx's and Engels' negative antithesis to empirical knowledge. They admit it only as a way of devising auxiliary constructions for the incomplete progress of historical experience. Abstract terms and concepts are merely functional, subordinate to the actual results which they recapitulate or generalize, but they have "no value at all if taken by themselves, severed from real history." To construct from them schemes and systems with a claim to independent meaning is the fallacy of philosophy. Since such constructions obscure the historical basis of human conditions, they tend to become themselves ideological, for the semblance of intellectual autonomy is tantamount to ideology. As a result, consistent historical research, as it is bound to destroy any such semblance, converges with the critique of ideology.

CLEMENT GREENBERG, AVANT-GARDE AND KITSCH

Excerpt (pp. 10–14) from "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5–22. © 1939 Clement Greenberg. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

The avant-garde's specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists' artists, its best poets, poets' poets, has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets. The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs. No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold. The paradox is real.

And now this elite is rapidly shrinking. Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened.

We must not be deceived by superficial phenomena and local successes. Picasso's shows still draw crowds, and T. S. Eliot is taught in the universities; the dealers in modernist art are still in business, and the publishers still publish some "difficult" poetry. But the avant-garde itself, already sensing the danger, is becoming more and more timid every day that passes. Academicism and commercialism are appearing in the strangest places. This can mean only one thing: that the avant-garde is becoming unsure of the audience it depends on—the rich and the cultivated.

Is it the nature itself of avant-garde culture that is alone responsible for the danger it finds itself in? Or is that only a dangerous liability? Are there other, and perhaps more important, factors involved?

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough—simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. For some reason this gigantic apparition has always been taken for granted. It is time we looked into its whys and wherefores.

Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy.

Previous to this the only market for formal culture, as distinguished from folk culture, had been among those who in addition to being able to read and write could command the leisure and comfort that always goes hand in hand with cultivation of some sort. This until then had been inextricably associated with literacy. But with the introduction of universal literacy, the ability to read and write became almost a minor skill like driving a car, and it no longer served to distinguish an individual's cultural inclinations, since it was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes. The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city's traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for the folk culture whose background was the countryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.

Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the

epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.

The pre-condition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from it devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system and discards the rest. It draws its life blood, so to speak, from this reservoir of accumulated experience. This is what is really meant when it is said that the popular art and literature of today were once the daring, esoteric art and literature of yesterday. Of course, no such thing is true. What is meant is that when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new “twists,” which are then watered down and served up as kitsch. Self-evidently, all kitsch is academic, and conversely, all that’s academic is kitsch. For what is called the academic as such no longer has an independent existence, but has become the stuffed-shirt “front” for kitsch. The methods of industrialism displace the handicrafts.

Because it can be turned out mechanically, kitsch has become an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true culture could never be except accidentally. It has been capitalized at a tremendous investment which must show commensurate returns; it is compelled to extend as well as to keep its markets. While it is essentially its own salesman, a great sales apparatus has nevertheless been created for it, which brings pressure to bear on every member of society. Traps are laid even in those areas, so to speak, that are the preserves of genuine culture. It is not enough today, in a country like ours, to have an inclination towards the latter; one must have a true passion for it that will give him the power to resist the faked article that surrounds and presses in on him from the moment he is old enough to look at the funny papers. Kitsch is deceptive. It has many different levels, and some of them are high enough to be dangerous to the naive seeker of true light. A magazine like the *New Yorker*, which is fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade, converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde material for its own uses. Nor is every single item of kitsch altogether worthless. Now and then it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor; and these accidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should know better.

Kitsch’s enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself, and its members have not always resisted this temptation. Ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to it entirely. And then those puzzling borderline cases appear, such as the popular novelist, Simenon, in France, and Steinbeck in this country. The net result is always to the detriment of true culture, in any case.

Kitsch has not been confined to the cities in which it was born, but has flowed out over the countryside, wiping out folk culture. Nor has it shown any regard for geographical and national cultural boundaries. Another mass product of Western industrialism, it has gone on a triumphal tour of the world, crowding out and defacing native cultures in one

colonial country after another, so that it is now by way of becoming a universal culture, the first universal culture ever beheld. Today the Chinaman, no less than the South American Indian, the Hindu, no less than the Polynesian, have come to prefer to the products of their native art magazine covers, rotogravure sections, and calendar girls. How is this virulence of kitsch, this irresistible attractiveness, to be explained? Naturally, machine-made kitsch can undersell the native handmade article, and the prestige of the West also helps, but why is kitsch a so much more profitable export article than Rembrandt? One, after all, can be reproduced as cheaply as the other.

ARTHUR DANTO, THE ARTWORLD

Excerpt (pp. 571–74) from “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 571–84. Estate of Arthur Danto. Reprinted by kind permission of the *Journal of Philosophy*.

Hamlet and Socrates, though in praise and deprecation respectively, spoke of art as a mirror held up to nature. As with many disagreements in attitude, this one has a factual basis. Socrates saw mirrors as but reflecting what we can already see; so art, insofar as mirrorlike, yields idle accurate duplications of the appearances of things, and is of no cognitive benefit whatever. Hamlet, more acutely, recognized a remarkable feature of reflecting surfaces, namely that they show us what we could not otherwise perceive—our own face and form—and so art, insofar as it is mirrorlike, reveals us to ourselves, and is, even by socratic criteria, of some cognitive utility after all. As a philosopher, however, I find Socrates’ discussion defective on other, perhaps less profound grounds than these. If a mirror-image of *o* is indeed an imitation of *o*, then, if art is imitation, mirror-images are art. But in fact mirroring objects no more is art than returning weapons to a madman is justice; and reference to mirrorings would be just the sly sort of counterinstance we would expect Socrates to bring forward in rebuttal of the theory he instead uses them to illustrate. If that theory requires us to class *these* as art, it thereby shows its inadequacy: “is an imitation” will not do as a sufficient condition for “is art.” Yet, perhaps because artists were engaged in imitation, in Socrates’ time and after, the insufficiency of the theory was not noticed until the invention of photography. Once rejected as a sufficient condition, mimesis was quickly discarded as even a necessary one; and since the achievement of Kandinsky, mimetic features have been relegated to the periphery of critical concern, so much so that some works survive in spite of possessing those virtues, excellence in which was once celebrated as the essence of art, narrowly escaping demotion to mere illustrations.

It is, of course, indispensable in socratic discussion that all participants be masters of the concept up for analysis, since the aim is to match a real defining expression to a term in active use, and the test for adequacy presumably consists in showing that the former analyzes and applies to all and only those things of which the latter is true. The popular disclaimer notwithstanding, then, Socrates’ auditors purportedly knew what art was as

well as what they liked; and a theory of art, regarded here as a real definition of 'Art', is accordingly not to be of great use in helping men to recognize instances of its application. Their antecedent ability to do this is precisely what the adequacy of the theory is to be tested against, the problem being only to make explicit what they already know. It is *our* use of the term that the theory allegedly means to capture, but we are supposed able, in the words of a recent writer, "to separate those objects which are works of art from those which are not, because . . . we know how correctly to use the word 'art' and to apply the phrase 'work of art.'" Theories, on this account, are somewhat like mirror-images on Socrates' account, showing forth what we already know, wordy reflections of the actual linguistic practice we are masters in. But telling artworks from other things is not so simple a matter, even for native speakers, and these days one might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so. And part of the reason for this lies in the fact that terrain is constituted artistic in virtue of artistic theories, so that one use of theories, in addition to helping us discriminate art from the rest, consists in making art possible. Glaucon and the others could hardly have known what was art and what not: otherwise they would never have been taken in by mirror-images.

Suppose one thinks of the discovery of a whole new class of artworks as something analogous to the discovery of a whole new class of facts anywhere, viz., as something for theoreticians to explain. In science, as elsewhere, we often accommodate new facts to old theories via auxiliary hypotheses, a pardonable enough conservatism when the theory in question is deemed too valuable to be jettisoned all at once. Now the Imitation Theory of Art (IT) is, if one but thinks it through, an exceedingly powerful theory, explaining a great many phenomena connected with the causation and evaluation of artworks, bringing a surprising unity into a complex domain. Moreover, it is a simple matter to shore it up against many purported counterinstances by such auxiliary hypotheses as that the artist who deviates from mimeticity is perverse, inept, or mad. Ineptitude, chicanery, or folly are, in fact, testable predications. Suppose, then, tests reveal that these hypotheses fail to hold, that the theory, now beyond repair, must be replaced. And a new theory is worked out, capturing what it can of the old theory's competence, together with the heretofore recalcitrant facts. One might, thinking along these lines, represent certain episodes in the history of art as not dissimilar to certain episodes in the history of science, where a conceptual revolution is being effected and where refusal to countenance certain facts, while in part due to prejudice, inertia, and self-interest, is due also to the fact that a well-established, or at least widely credited theory is being threatened in such a way that all coherence goes.

Some such episode transpired with the advent of post-impressionist paintings. In terms of the prevailing artistic theory (IT), it was impossible to accept these as art unless inept art: otherwise they could be discounted as hoaxes, self-advertisements, or the visual counterparts of madmen's ravings. So to get them accepted *as* art, on a footing with the *Transfiguration* (not to speak of a Landseer stag), required not so much a revolution in

taste as a theoretical revision of rather considerable proportions, involving not only the artistic enfranchisement of these objects, but an emphasis upon newly significant features of accepted artworks, so that quite different accounts of their status as artworks would now have to be given. As a result of the new theory's acceptance, not only were post-impressionist paintings taken up as art, but numbers of objects (masks, weapons, etc.) were transferred from anthropological museums (and heterogeneous other places) to *musées des beaux arts*, though, as we would expect from the fact that a criterion for the acceptance of a new theory is that it account for whatever the older one did, nothing had to be transferred out of the *musée des beaux arts*—even if there were internal rearrangements as between storage rooms and exhibition space. Countless native speakers hung upon suburban mantelpieces innumerable replicas of paradigm cases for teaching the expression 'work of art' that would have sent their Edwardian forebears into linguistic apoplexy.

To be sure, I distort by speaking of a theory: historically, there were several, all, interestingly enough, more or less defined in terms of the IT. Art-historical complexities must yield before the exigencies of logical exposition, and I shall speak as though there were one replacing theory, partially compensating for historical falsity by choosing one which was actually enunciated. According to it, the artists in question were to be understood not as unsuccessfully imitating real forms but as successfully creating new ones, quite as real as the forms which the older art had been thought, in its best examples, to be creditably imitating. Art, after all, had long since been thought of as creative (Vasari says that God was the first artist), and the post-impressionists were to be explained as genuinely creative, aiming, in Roger Fry's words, "not at illusion but reality." This theory (RT) furnished a whole new mode of looking at painting, old and new. Indeed, one might almost interpret the crude drawing in Van Gogh and Cézanne, the dislocation of form from contour in Rouault and Dufy, the arbitrary use of color planes in Gauguin and the Fauves, as so many ways of drawing attention to the fact that these were *non-imitations*, specifically intended not to deceive. Logically, this would be roughly like printing "Not Legal Tender" across a brilliantly counterfeited dollar bill, the resulting object (counterfeit *cum* inscription) rendered incapable of deceiving anyone. It is not an illusory dollar bill, but then, just because it is non-illusory it does not automatically become a real dollar bill either. It rather occupies a freshly opened area between real objects and real facsimiles of real objects: it is a non-facsimile, if one requires a word, and a new contribution to the world. Thus, Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, as a consequence of certain unmistakable distortions, turns out to be a non-facsimile of real-life potato eaters; and inasmuch as these are not facsimiles of potato eaters, Van Gogh's picture, as a non-imitation, had as much right to be called a real object as did its putative subjects. By means of this theory (RT), artworks re-entered the thick of things from which socratic theory (IT) had sought to evict them: if no *more* real than what carpenters wrought, they were at least no *less* real. The Post-Impressionist won a victory in ontology.

THEODOR W. ADORNO, CULTURE INDUSTRY RECONSIDERED

Excerpts (pp. 98–102) from “Culture Industry Reconsidered” (1975), in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), 98–106. Copyright © 2001 Routledge. Reproduced with permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.

The term culture industry was perhaps used for the first time in the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Horkheimer and I published in Amsterdam in 1947. In our drafts we spoke of ‘mass culture’. We replaced that expression with ‘culture industry’ in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme. The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. The individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap. This is made possible by contemporary technical capabilities as well as by economic and administrative concentration. The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total. Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object. The very word mass-media, specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain. Neither is it a question of primary concern for the masses, nor of the techniques of communication as such, but of the spirit which sufflates them, their master’s voice. The culture industry misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable. How this mentality might be changed is excluded throughout. The masses are not the measure but the ideology of the culture industry, even though the culture industry itself could scarcely exist without adapting to the masses.

The cultural commodities of the industry are governed . . . by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation. The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. Ever since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the marketplace they had already possessed something of this quality. But then they sought after profit only indirectly, over and above their autonomous essence. New on the part of the culture industry is the direct and undisguised primacy

of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy in its most typical products. The autonomy of works of art, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, and was always permeated by a constellation of effects, is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, with or without the conscious will of those in control. [. . .] Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through. This quantitative shift is so great that it calls forth entirely new phenomena. Ultimately, the culture industry no longer even needs to directly pursue everywhere the profit interests from which it originated. These interests have become objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the cultural commodities which must be swallowed anyway. The culture industry turns into public relations, the manufacturing of 'goodwill' per se, without regard for particular firms or saleable objects. Brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement. [. . .]

. . . The expression 'industry' is not to be taken literally. It refers to the standardization of the thing itself—such as that of the Western, familiar to every movie-goer—and to the rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process. Although in film, the central sector of the culture industry, the production process resembles technical modes of operation in the extensive division of labor, the employment of machines and the separation of the laborers from the means of production—expressed in the perennial conflict between artists active in the culture industry and those who control it—individual forms of production are nevertheless maintained. Each product affects an individual air; individuality itself serves to reinforce ideology, in so far as the illusion is conjured up that the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life. Now, as ever, the culture industry exists in the 'service' of third persons, maintaining its affinity to the declining circulation process of capital, to the commerce from which it came into being. Its ideology above all makes use of the star system, borrowed from individualistic art and its commercial exploitation. The more dehumanized its methods of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities and operates with heart-throbs. It is industrial more in a sociological sense, in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even when nothing is manufactured—as in the rationalization of office work—rather than in the sense of anything really and actually produced by technological rationality. Accordingly, the misinvestments of the culture industry are considerable, throwing those branches rendered obsolete by new techniques into crises, which seldom lead to changes for the better.

The concept of technique in the culture industry is only in name identical with technique in works of art. In the latter, technique is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic. In contrast, the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object. The culture industry finds ideological support precisely in so far as it carefully shields itself from the full potential of the techniques

contained in its products. It lives parasitically from the extra-artistic technique of the material production of goods, without regard for the obligation to the internal artistic whole implied by its functionality (*Sachlichkeit*), but also without concern for the laws of form demanded by aesthetic autonomy. The result for the physiognomy of the culture industry is essentially a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism on the other. Adopting Benjamin's designation of the traditional work of art by the concept of aura, the presence of that which is not present, the culture industry is defined by the fact that it does not strictly counterpose another principle to that of aura, but rather by the fact that it conserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist. By this means the culture industry betrays its own ideological abuses.

It has recently become customary among cultural officials as well as sociologists to warn against underestimating the culture industry while pointing to its great importance for the development of the consciousness of its consumers. It is to be taken seriously, without cultured snobbism. In actuality the culture industry is important as a moment of the spirit which dominates today. Whoever ignores its influence out of skepticism for what it stuffs into people would be naive. Yet there is a deceptive glitter about the admonition to take it seriously. Because of its social role, disturbing questions about its quality, about truth or untruth, and about the aesthetic niveau of the culture industry's emissions are repressed, or at least excluded from the so-called sociology of communications. The critic is accused of taking refuge in arrogant esoterica. It would be advisable first to indicate the double meaning of importance that slowly worms its way in unnoticed. Even if it touches the lives of innumerable people, the function of something is no guarantee of its particular quality. The blending of aesthetics with its residual communicative aspects leads art, as a social phenomenon, not to its rightful position in opposition to alleged artistic snobbism, but rather in a variety of ways to the defense of its baneful social consequences. The importance of the culture industry in the spiritual constitution of the masses is no dispensation for reflection on its objective legitimation, its essential being, least of all by a science which thinks itself pragmatic. On the contrary: such reflection becomes necessary precisely for this reason. To take the culture industry as seriously as its unquestioned role demands, means to take it seriously critically, and not to cower in the face of its monopolistic character.

II. THE VALUE OF ART

IGOR KOPYTOFF, THE CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY OF THINGS

Excerpts (pp. 66–76, 80, 82–83) from “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91. Copyright © 1986 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its “status” and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? [. . .]

[. . .] We have . . . biographical expectations of things. To us, a biography of a painting by Renoir that ends up in an incinerator is as tragic, in its way, as the biography of a person who ends up murdered. That is obvious. But there are other events in the biography of objects that convey more subtle meanings. What of a Renoir ending up in a private and inaccessible collection? Of one lying neglected in a museum basement? How should we feel about yet another Renoir leaving France for the United States? Or for Nigeria? The cultural responses to such biographical details reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes to objects labeled “art.”

Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects—as of alien ideas—is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use. The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner’s relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car. [. . .]

But . . . such biographies—economic, technical, social—may or may not be culturally informed. What would make a biography cultural is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective. A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories. It is from this point of view that I should like to propose a framework for looking at commodities—or rather, speaking processually, at commoditization. But first, what is a commodity? [. . .]

I assume commodities to be a universal cultural phenomenon. Their existence is a concomitant of the existence of transactions that involve the exchange of things (objects and services), exchange being a universal feature of human social life and, according to some theorists, at the very core of it. Where societies differ is in the ways commoditization as a special expression of exchange is structured and related to the social system, in

the factors that encourage or contain it, in the long-term tendencies for it to expand or stabilize, and in the cultural and ideological premises that suffuse its workings.

What, then, makes a thing a commodity? A commodity is a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value. The counterpart is by the same token also a commodity at the time of exchange. The exchange can be direct or it can be achieved indirectly by way of money, one of whose functions is as a means of exchange. Hence, anything that can be bought for money is at that point a commodity, whatever the fate that is reserved for it after the transaction has been made (it may, thereafter, be decommo­ditized). Hence, in the West, as a matter of cultural shorthand, we usually take saleability to be the unmistakable indicator of commodity status, while non-saleability imparts to a thing a special aura of apartness from the mundane and the common. In fact, of course, saleability for money is not a necessary feature of commodity status, given the existence of commodity exchange in non-monetary economies. [. . .]

To be saleable for money or to be exchangeable for a wide array of other things is to have something in common with a large number of exchangeable things that, taken together, partake of a single universe of comparable values. To use an appropriately loaded even if archaic term, to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be “common”—the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else. The perfect commodity would be one that is exchangeable with anything and everything else, as the perfectly commoditized world would be one in which everything is exchangeable or for sale. By the same token, the perfectly decommo­ditized world would be one in which everything is singular, unique, and unexchangeable.

The two situations are ideal polar types, and no real economic system could conform to either. In no system is everything so singular as to preclude even the hint of exchange. And in no system, except in some extravagant Marxian image of an utterly commoditized capitalism, is everything a commodity and exchangeable for everything else within a unitary sphere of exchange. Such a construction of the world—in the first case as totally heterogeneous in terms of valuation and, in the second, as totally homogeneous—would be humanly and culturally impossible. But they are two extremes between which every real economy occupies its own peculiar place. [. . .]

In the realm of exchange values, this means that the natural world of singular things must be arranged into several manageable value classes—that is, different things must be selected and made cognitively similar when put together within each category and dissimilar when put into different categories. This is the basis for a well-known economic phenomenon—that of several spheres of exchange values, which operate more or less independently of one another. The phenomenon is found in every society, though Westerners are most apt to perceive it in uncommercialized and unmonetized economies. The nature and structure of these spheres of exchange varies among societies because . . . the cultural systems of classification reflect the structure and the cultural

resources of the societies in question. And beyond that . . . there's also some tendency to impose a hierarchy upon the categories. [. . .]

The problem of value and value equivalence has always been a philosophical conundrum in economics. It involves the mysterious process by which things that are patently unlike are somehow made to be alike with respect to value, making yams, for example, somehow comparable to and exchangeable with a mortar or a pot. In the terms we have been using here, this involves taking the patently singular and inserting it into a uniform category of value with other patently singular things. For all the difficulties that the labor theory of value presents, it at least suggests that while yams and pots can conceivably be compared by the labor required to produce them (even while allowing for the different investment in training that the labor represents in each case), no such common standard is available in comparing yams to ritual offices or pots to wives and offspring. Hence, the immense difficulty, indeed impossibility, of lumping all such disparate items into a single commodity sphere. This difficulty provides the natural basis for the cultural construction of separate spheres of exchange. The culture takes on the less sweeping task of making value equivalence by creating several discrete commodity spheres. [. . .]

Commoditization, then, is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being. Its expansion takes place in two ways: (a) with respect to each thing, by making it exchangeable for more and more other things, and (b) with respect to the system as a whole, by making more and more different things more widely exchangeable. [. . .]

The counterdrive to this potential onrush of commoditization is culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenizes value, while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive commoditization is anti-cultural—as indeed so many have perceived it or sensed it to be. And if, as Durkheim (1912/1915) saw it, societies need to set apart a certain portion of their environment, marking it as “sacred,” singularization is one means to this end. Culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular, it resists the commoditization of others; and it sometimes resingularizes what has been commoditized.

In every society, there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized. Some of the prohibitions are cultural and upheld collectively. In state societies, many of these prohibitions are the handwork of the state, with the usual intertwining between what serves the society at large, what serves the state, and what serves the specific groups in control. This applies to much of what one thinks of as the symbolic inventory of a society: public lands, monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal residences, chiefly insignia, ritual objects, and so on. Power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects. [. . .]

Such singularization is sometimes extended to things that are normally commodities—in effect, commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere. Thus, in the ritual paraphernalia of the British monarchy, we find a Star of India

that, contrary to what would normally have happened, was prevented from becoming a commodity and eventually singularized into a “crown jewel.” [. . .]

If sacralization can be achieved by singularity, singularity does not guarantee sacralization. Being a non-commodity does not by itself assure high regard, and many singular things (that is, non-exchangeable things) may be worth very little. [. . .] To be a non-commodity is to be “priceless” in the full possible sense of the term, ranging from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless.

In addition to things being classified as more or less singular, there is also what might be called terminal commoditization, in which further exchange is precluded by fiat. In many societies, medicines are so treated: the medicine man makes and sells a medicine that is utterly singular since it is efficacious only for the intended patient. Terminal commoditization also marked the sale of indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church of half a millennium ago: the sinner could buy them but not resell them. In modern Western medicine, such terminal commoditization is achieved legally; it rests on the prohibition against reselling a prescribed drug and against selling any medicine without proper licensing. [. . .]

Other factors besides legal or cultural fiat may create terminal commodities. Most consumer goods are, after all, destined to be terminal or so, at least, it is hoped by the manufacturer. The expectation is easily enough fulfilled with such things as canned peas, though even here external circumstances can intrude; in times of war shortages, all sorts of normally consumable goods begin to serve as a store of wealth and, instead of being consumed, circulate endlessly in the market. With durable goods, a second-hand market normally develops, and the idea that it does may be fostered by the sellers. There is an area of our economy in which the selling strategy rests on stressing that the commoditization of goods bought for consumption need not be terminal: thus, the promise that oriental carpets, though bought for use, are a “good investment,” or that certain expensive cars have a “high resale value.”

The existence of terminal commoditization raises a point that is central to the analysis of slavery, where the fact that a person has been bought does not in itself tell us anything about the uses to which the person may then be put (Kopytoff 1982, 223ff). Some purchased people ended up in the mines, on plantations, or on galleys; others became Grand Viziers or Imperial Roman Admirals. In the same way, the fact that an object is bought or exchanged says nothing about its subsequent status and whether it will remain a commodity or not. But unless formally decommoditized, commoditized things remain potential commodities—they continue to have an exchange value, even if they have been effectively withdrawn from their exchange sphere and deactivated, so to speak, as commodities. This deactivation leaves them open not only to the various kinds of singularization I have mentioned so far, but also to individual, as opposed to collective, redefinitions. [. . .]

There is clearly a yearning for singularization in complex societies. Much of it is satisfied individually, by private singularization, often on principles as mundane as the one

that governs the fate of heirlooms and old slippers alike—the longevity of the relation assimilates them in some sense to the person and makes parting from them unthinkable.

Sometimes the yearning assumes the proportions of a collective hunger, apparent in the widespread response to ever-new kinds of singularizations. Old beer cans, matchbooks, and comic books suddenly become worthy of being collected, moved from the sphere of the singularly worthless to that of the expensive singular. And there is a continuing appeal in stamp collecting—where, one may note, the stamps are preferably cancelled ones so there is no doubt about their worthlessness in the circle of commodities for which they were originally intended. As among individuals, much of the collective singularization is achieved by reference to the passage of time. Cars as commodities lose value as they age, but at about the age of thirty they begin to move into the category of antiques and rise in value with every receding year. [. . .]

Most of the conflict, however, between commoditization and singularization in complex societies takes place within individuals, leading to what appear to be anomalies in cognition, inconsistencies in values, and uncertainties in action. People in these societies all maintain some private vision of a hierarchy of exchange sphere, but the justification for this hierarchy is not . . . integrally tied to the exchange structure itself; rather, the justification must be imported from outside the system of exchange, from such autonomous and usually parochial systems as that of aesthetics, or morality, or religion, or specialized professional concerns. When we feel that selling a Rembrandt or an heirloom is trading downward, the explanation for our attitude is that things called “art” or “historical objects” are superior to the world of commerce. This is the reason why the high value of the singular in complex societies becomes so easily embroiled in snobbery. The high value does not visibly reside in the exchange system itself. . . . In a complex society the absence of . . . visible confirmation[s] of prestige, of what exactly is an “upward” conversion, makes it necessary to attribute high but nonmonetary value to aesthetic, stylistic, ethnic, class, or genealogical esoterica.

When things participate simultaneously in cognitively distinct yet effectively intermeshed exchange spheres, one is constantly confronted with seeming paradoxes of value. A Picasso, though possessing a monetary value, is priceless in another, higher scheme. Hence, we feel uneasy, even offended, when a newspaper declares the Picasso to be worth \$690,000, for one should not be pricing the priceless. But in a pluralistic society, the “objective” pricelessness of the Picasso can only be unambiguously confirmed to us by its immense market price. Yet, the pricelessness still makes the Picasso in some sense more valuable than the pile of dollars it can fetch—as will be duly pointed out by the newspapers if the Picasso is stolen. Singularity, in brief, is confirmed not by the object’s structural position in an exchange system, but by intermittent forays into the commodity sphere, quickly followed by reentries into the closed sphere of singular “art.” But the two worlds cannot be kept separate for very long; for one thing, museums must

insure their holdings. So museums and art dealers will name prices, be accused of the sin of transforming art into a commodity, and, in response, defend themselves by blaming each other for creating and maintaining a commodity market. It would, however, be missing the point of this analysis to conclude that the talk about singular art is merely an ideological camouflage for an interest in merchandising. What is culturally significant here is precisely that there is an inner compulsion to defend oneself, to others and to oneself, against the charge of “merchandising” art.

The only time when the commodity status of a thing is beyond question is the moment of actual exchange. Most of the time, when the commodity is effectively out of the commodity sphere, its status is inevitably ambiguous and open to the push and pull of events and desires, as it is shuffled about in the flux of social life. This is the time when it is exposed to the well-nigh-infinite variety of attempts to singularize it. Thus, singularizations of various kinds, many of them fleeting, are a constant accompaniment of commoditization, all the more so when it becomes excessive. There is a kind of singularizing black market here that is the mirror-image of, and as inevitable as, the more familiar commoditizing black market that accompanies regulated singularizing economies. Thus, even things that unambiguously carry an exchange value—formally speaking, therefore, commodities—do absorb the other kind of worth, one that is nonmonetary and goes beyond exchange worth. We may take this to be the missing non-economic side of what Marx called commodity fetishism. For Marx, the worth of commodities is determined by the social relations of their production; but the existence of the exchange system makes the production process remote and misperceived, and it “masks” the commodity’s true worth (as, say, in the case of diamonds). This allows the commodity to be socially endowed with a fetishlike “power” that is unrelated to its true worth. Our analysis suggests, however, that some of that power is attributed to commodities after they are produced, and this by way of an autonomous cognitive and cultural process of singularization.

WALTER BENJAMIN, AURA

Excerpt (pp. 220–21) from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–51. Copyright © 1955 by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt A.M.; English translation copyright © 1968/1996 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, all rights reserved; and Writers House LLC acting as agent for the author.

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical

condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original.

The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so *vis-à-vis* technical reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.

The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie. In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus—namely, its authenticity—is interfered with whereas no natural object is vulnerable on that score. The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind.

**MICHAEL HUTTER AND RICHARD SHUSTERMAN, VARIETIES OF
ARTISTIC VALUE IN CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS**

Excerpts (pp. 197–200) from “Value and the Valuation of Art in Economic and Aesthetic Theory,” in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, vol. 1, ed. V.A. Ginsburgh and D. Throsby (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006), 171–208. Copyright © 2006 Elsevier BV. Reprinted with permission of Elsevier.

In the vague concept of artistic value, different kinds of value seem to be nested. We distinguish ten kinds which have been to some extent suggested in [aesthetic theories]. [. . .] It is hard to imagine how all these types of value could be organized into one accepted calculus for ranking the value of all works of art, not least because the relative weighting of these different types would be much contested. Yet, to distinguish them could enable us to be more precise about what we are in fact valuing when, with respect to particular artworks, we speak of artistic value.

(1) Art’s *moral or religious vision*, its power to edify and spiritually uplift, can still form part of a work’s artistic value, while the appeal to low human drives and the toleration of morally condemned behavior diminishes the value of an artwork. Form cannot be adequately isolated from content. The moral or religious vision expressed in a work forms part of the work’s content and structure, and as such its valuation can be legitimately included in our appraisal of the work’s value. [. . .]

(2) Art has long been valued for its deep *expressiveness*. Expression, it is argued, requires a medium through which the self can be expressed, and the various media of art, rich with perceptual and semantic potential, provide a superb matrix for such expression. Advocates of expression theories of art . . . argue that the artist begins with an unclear feeling or sense of what she wishes to express, and it is only through art that the expression acquires clarity and distinction. Apart from this transitive sense of expression, where an artwork’s expression is the expression of something anterior—a specific emotion, idea, etc.—there is an intransitive sense of artistic expressiveness that is valued. It makes sense to say of a painting or a piece of music that it is expressive without our being able to specify what exactly it expresses. Here expressiveness connotes the degree of power and impact which is suggestive of artistic value.

(3) Art’s *communicative power* for the sharing of feelings and ideas between artists and their public is part of artistic value. Art’s emotional quality, direct experiential appeal, and link to pleasure give it a penetrating, pervasive infectiousness that promotes easy, rapid, powerful, and widespread communication. Kant located the grounds of aesthetic judgment in the “*sensus communis*” of human nature. Schiller argued that only “the aesthetic mode of communication unites society because it relates that which is common to all” (1986, 217). [. . .]

(4) Communicative power is also essential to art’s *social and political* value. Artworks typically embody the meanings and ideals of the society in which they are created; even

works that have a revolutionary message must rely to some extent on shared meanings and values or else they would be unintelligible and totally rejected. Art thus provides an attractive repository of ideas and ideals that build social unity and stability, while enabling their transmission over generations. [. . .]

(5) Plato's condemnation of art as a deceptive purveyor of falsehood has been frequently countered by affirming art's *cognitive* value. Even if we dismiss the notion of a special form of truth that is accessible only through artistic means, art has undeniable value in effectively communicating a wide variety of truths and in honing our symbolic skills of conveying and processing very subtle forms of information. Because emotion has a strong bodily dimension, art's emotional power makes the truths it expresses more powerful and convincing, because as emotionally grasped truths they become more deeply embodied and impressed in our consciousness and memory. The very appreciation of form and meaning is an exercise whose practice enhances our cognitive skills and our proficiency in symbolic processing.

(6) Many theorists . . . locate art's value largely in the special, directly satisfying or pleasurable experience it gives. We call this art's *experiential* value. It includes art's entertainment value—the entertaining pleasure and distraction it provides as a pastime. But art also has experiential rewards that are not primarily pleasurable. Avant-garde works, for example, may produce experiences of shock, intensity or outrage that we recognize as valuable without their being pleasant or enjoyable. [. . .]

(7) Aesthetics has long emphasized certain formal or design values embodied in art: unity, harmony, complexity, balance, intensity, dramatic tension, etc. Such formal values are sometimes distinguished by philosophers as distinctively *aesthetic* values in contrast to artistic values. This is because these formal values clearly seem applicable to objects other than artworks (a flower or sunset or ocean storm) and do not seem to require historical knowledge of art in the ways demanded by assessments of art-historical value, art-technical value, or cult value. Nor do these values demand for their appreciation the sort of external, non-aesthetic knowledge we need for assessing the cognitive, moral, religious or communicative value of artworks. [. . .]

Expressiveness, in the intransitive sense of evocative suggestiveness, can also be included under specifically aesthetic properties of artworks. We can appreciate an artwork as expressive without external art-historical knowledge about what its creator wanted to express and without even assuming that there was a distinct idea the work aims to express. [. . .]

(8) A specific kind of artistic value could be called *art-technical* value. Such value relates to the skill, technique, or technical innovation displayed by an artwork. We can, for example, regard the content or form of an artwork as not particularly worthy of appreciation but still value the virtuosity of technique or invention that the work or its performance displays.

(9) *Art-historical* value concerns the value an artwork has for art's history, either by its providing evidence of historical innovation or influence, whether technical, stylistic, or

in terms of new content, or by simply being a crucial historical artifact for art history. Though some viewers find Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon* a very unattractive painting, its artistic value in terms of art-historical value (as the harbinger of cubism) cannot be denied. Physical rarity, because very few other surviving exemplars of its period or style have been found, adds to appreciation.

(10) Related to art-historical value is *artistic cult* value. Through a history of appreciation and dissemination, a particular artwork, for example, Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda*, becomes identified as a hallowed locus of artistic genius and a paradigm of self-representation. The strength of the aura, to which Benjamin refers, gives value to the reproduced versions of the image, and the volume of reproductions, in turn, increases the cult value of the original.

Some of the works of art created also have economic value. Economic value is a property which all works can attain, irrespective of the kind of artistic value attributed to a particular work. Money is paid in exchange for original works, copies of originals (books, prints and disks), and performances of musical or theatrical scores. Certain patterns of demand and supply are directly connected to some of the artistic values sketched above.

PIERRE BOURDIEU, THE PRODUCTION OF BELIEF

Excerpts (pp. 74–81, 103) from “The Production of Belief” (1980), in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. R. Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 74–111. Copyright © 1993 Columbia University Press. Reprinted by permission of Columbia University Press and Polity Press, Cambridge.

The art business, a trade in things that have no price, belongs to the class of practices in which the logic of the pre-capitalist economy lives on. . . . These practices, functioning as practical *negations*, can only work by pretending not to be doing what they are doing. Defying ordinary logic, they lend themselves to two opposed readings, both equally false, which each undo their essential duality and duplicity by reducing them either to the disavowal or to what is disavowed—to disinterestedness or self-interest. The challenge which economies based on disavowal of the ‘economic’ present to all forms of economism lies precisely in the fact that they function, and can function, in practice—and not merely in the agents’ representations—only by virtue of a constant, collective repression of narrowly ‘economic’ interest and of the real nature of the practices revealed by ‘economic’ analysis.

In this economic universe, whose very functioning is defined by a ‘refusal’ of the ‘commercial’ which is in fact a collective disavowal of commercial interests and profits, the most ‘anti-economic’ and most visibly ‘disinterested’ behaviours, which in an ‘economic’ universe would be those most ruthlessly condemned, contain a form of economic rationality (even in the restricted sense) and in no way exclude their authors from even the ‘economic’ profits awaiting those who conform to the law of this universe. In other words, alongside the pursuit of ‘economic’ profit, which treats the cultural goods business

as a business like any other, and not the most profitable, 'economically' speaking (as the best-informed, i.e. the most 'disinterested', art dealers point out) and merely adapts itself to the demand of an already converted clientele, there is also room for the *accumulation of symbolic capital*. 'Symbolic capital' is to be understood as economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a 'credit' which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees 'economic' profits. Producers and vendors of cultural goods who 'go commercial' condemn themselves, and not only from an ethical or aesthetic point of view, because they deprive themselves of the opportunities open to those who can *recognize* the specific demands of this universe and who, by concealing from themselves and others the interests at stake in their practice, obtain the means of deriving profits from disinterestedness. In short, when the only usable, effective capital is the (mis)recognized, legitimate capital called 'prestige' or 'authority', the economic capital that cultural undertakings generally require cannot secure the specific profits produced by the field—not the 'economic' profits they always imply—unless it is reconverted into symbolic capital. For the author, the critic, the art dealer, the publisher or the theatre manager, the only legitimate accumulation consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) or persons (through publication, exhibition, etc.) and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation.

[. . .] The disavowed economic enterprise of art dealers or publishers, 'cultural bankers' in whom art and business meet in practice—which predisposes them for the role of scapegoat—cannot succeed, even in 'economic' terms, unless it is guided by a practical mastery of the laws of the functioning of the field in which cultural goods are produced and circulate, i.e. by an entirely improbable, and in any case rarely achieved, combination of the realism implying minor concessions to 'economic' necessities that are disavowed but not denied and the conviction which excludes them. The fact that the disavowal of the 'economy' is neither a simple ideological mask nor a complete repudiation of economic interest explains why, on the one hand, new producers whose only capital is their conviction can establish themselves in the market by appealing to the values whereby the dominant figures accumulated their symbolic capital, and why, on the other hand, only those who can come to terms with the 'economic' constraints inscribed in this bad-faith economy can reap the full 'economic' profits of their symbolic capital.

WHO CREATES THE 'CREATOR'?

The 'charismatic' ideology which is the ultimate basis of belief in the value of a work of art and which is therefore the basis of functioning of the field of production and circulation of cultural commodities, is undoubtedly the main obstacle to a rigorous science of the production of the value of cultural goods. It is this ideology which directs attention to the *apparent producer*, the painter, writer or composer, in short, the 'author', suppressing

the question of what authorizes the author, what creates the authority with which authors authorize. If it is all too obvious that the price of a picture is not determined by the sum of the production costs—the raw material and the painter's labour time—and if works of art provide a golden example for those who seek to refute Marx's labour theory of value (which anyway gives a special status to artistic production), this is perhaps because we wrongly define the unit of production or, which amounts to the same thing, the process of production.

The question can be asked in its most concrete form . . . : who is the true producer of the value of the work—the painter or the dealer . . . ? The ideology of creation, which makes the author the first and last source of the value of his work, conceals the fact that the cultural businessman (art dealer, publisher, etc.) is at one and the same time the person who exploits the labour of the 'creator' by trading in the 'sacred' and the person who, by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing or staging it, consecrates a product which he has 'discovered' and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource; and the more consecrated he personally is, the more strongly he consecrates the work. The art trader is not just the agent who gives the work a commercial value by bringing it into a market; he is not just the representative, the impresario, who 'defends the authors he loves'. He is the person who can proclaim the value of the author he defends (cf. the fiction of the catalogue or blurb) and above all 'invests his prestige' in the author's cause, acting as a 'symbolic banker' who offers as security all the symbolic capital he has accumulated (which he is liable to forfeit if he backs a 'loser'). This investment, of which the accompanying 'economic' investments are themselves only a guarantee, is what brings the producer into the cycle of consecration. Entering the field of literature is not so much like going into religion as getting into a select club. . . . Even clearer is the role of the art dealer, who literally has to 'introduce' the artist and his work into ever more select company (group exhibitions, one-man shows, prestigious collections, museums) and ever more sought-after places. But the law of this universe, whereby the less visible the investment, the more productive it is symbolically, means that promotion exercises, which in the business world take the overt form of publicity, must here be euphemized. The art trader cannot serve his 'discovery' unless he applies all his conviction, which rules out 'sordidly commercial' manoeuvres, manipulation and the 'hard sell', in favour of the softer, more discreet forms of 'public relations' (which are themselves a highly euphemized form of publicity)—receptions, society gatherings, and judiciously placed confidences.

THE CIRCLE OF BELIEF

[. . .] We still have to determine the source of the art-businessman's acknowledged power to consecrate. The charismatic ideology has a ready-made answer: the 'great' dealers, the 'great' publishers, are inspired talent-spotters who, guided by their disinterested, unreasoning passion for a work of art, have 'made' the painter or writer, or have helped him make himself, by encouraging him in difficult moments with the faith they had in him,

guiding him with their advice and freeing him from material worries. To avoid an endless regress in the chain of causes, perhaps it is necessary to cease thinking in the logic, which a whole tradition encourages, of the 'first beginning', which inevitably leads to faith in the 'creator'. [. . .] His 'authority' is itself a credit-based value, which only exists in the relationship with the field of production as a whole, i.e. with the artists or writers who belong to his 'stable' . . . and with those who do not and would or would not like to; in the relationship with the other dealers or publishers who do or do not envy him his painters or writers and are or are not capable of taking them from him; in the relationship with the critics, who do or do not believe in his judgement, and speak of his 'products' with varying degrees of respect; in the relationship with his clients and customers, who perceive his 'trademark' with greater or lesser clarity and do or do not place their trust in it. This 'authority' is nothing other than 'credit' with a set of agents who constitute 'connections' whose value is proportionate to the credit they themselves command. It is all too obvious that critics also collaborate with the art trader in the effort of consecration which makes the reputation and, at least in the long term, the monetary value of works. 'Discovering' the 'new talents', they guide buyers' and sellers' choices by their writings or advice . . . and by their verdicts, which, though offered as purely aesthetic, entail significant economic effects (juries for artistic prizes). Among the makers of the work of art, we must finally include the public, which helps to make its value by appropriating it materially (collectors) or symbolically (audiences, readers), and by objectively or subjectively identifying part of its own value with these appropriations. In short, what 'makes reputations' is not . . . this or that 'influential' person, this or that institution, review, magazine, academy, coterie, dealer or publisher; it is not even the whole set of what are sometimes called 'personalities of the world of arts and letters'; it is the field of production, understood as the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated.

FAITH AND BAD FAITH

The source of the efficacy of all acts of consecration is the field itself, the locus of the accumulated social energy which the agents and institutions help to reproduce through the struggles in which they try to appropriate it and into which they put what they have acquired from it in previous struggles. The value of works of art in general—the basis of the value of each particular work—and the belief which underlies it, are generated in the incessant, innumerable struggles to establish the value of this or that particular work, i.e. not only in the competition between agents (authors, actors, writers, critics, directors, publishers, dealers, etc.) whose interests (in the broadest sense) are linked to different cultural goods, . . . 'established' painting or avant-garde painting, 'mainstream' literature or 'advanced' literature, but also in the conflicts between agents occupying different positions in the production of products of the same type: painters and dealers, authors and

publishers, writers and critics, etc. Even if these struggles never clearly set the 'commercial' against the 'non-commercial', 'disinterestedness' against 'cynicism', they almost always involve recognition of the ultimate values of 'disinterestedness' through the denunciation of the mercenary compromises or calculating manoeuvres of the adversary, so that disavowal of the 'economy' is placed at the very heart of the field, as the principle governing its functioning and transformation.

This is why the dual reality of the ambivalent painter-dealer or writer-publisher relationship is most clearly revealed in moments of crisis, when the objective reality of each of the positions and their relationship is unveiled and the values which do the veiling are reaffirmed. No one is better placed than art dealers to know the interests of the makers of works and the strategies they use to defend their interests or to conceal their strategies. Although dealers form a protective screen between the artist and the market, they are also what link them to the market and so provoke, by their very existence, cruel unmaskings of the truth of artistic practice. [. . .] The makers and marketers of works of art are adversaries in collusion, who each abide by the same law which demands the repression of direct manifestations of personal interest, at least in its overtly 'economic' form, and which has every appearance of transcendence although it is only the product of the cross-censorship weighing more or less equally on each of those who impose it on all the others.

A similar mechanism operates when an unknown artist, without credit or credibility, is turned into a known and recognized artist. The struggle to impose the dominant definition of art, i.e. to impose a style, embodied in a particular producer or group of producers, gives the work of art a value by putting it at stake, inside and outside the field of production. Everyone can challenge his or her adversaries' claim to distinguish art from non-art without ever calling into question this fundamental claim. Precisely because of the conviction that good and bad painting exist, competitors can exclude each other from the field of painting, thereby giving it the stakes and the motor without which it could not function. And nothing better conceals the objective collusion which is the matrix of specifically artistic value than the conflicts through which it operates. [. . .]

COLLECTIVE MISRECOGNITION

[. . .] The artist who puts her name on a ready-made article and produces an object whose market price is incommensurate with its cost of production is collectively mandated to perform a magic act which would be nothing without the whole tradition leading up to her gesture, and without the universe of celebrants and believers who give it meaning and value in terms of that tradition. The source of 'creative' power, the ineffable *mana* or charisma celebrated by the tradition, need not be sought anywhere other than in the field, i.e. in the system of objective relations which constitute it, in the struggles of which it is the site and in the specific form of energy or capital which is generated there. So it is both true and untrue to say that the commercial value of a work of art is incommensurate with its cost of production. It is true if one only takes account of the manufacture of the material

object; it is not true if one is referring to the production of the work of art as a sacred, consecrated object, the product of a vast operation of *social alchemy* jointly conducted with equal conviction and very unequal profits, by all the agents involved in the field of production, i.e. obscure artists and writers as well as ‘consecrated’ masters, critics and publishers as well as authors, enthusiastic clients as well as convinced vendors. These are contributions, including the most obscure, which the partial materialism of economism ignores, and which only have to be taken into account in order to see that the production of the work of art, i.e. of the artist, is no exception to the law of the conservation of social energy. [. . .]

Without entering into a systematic analysis of the field of the galleries . . . we may simply observe that . . . the differences which separate the galleries according to their seniority (and their celebrity), and therefore according to the degree of consecration and the market value of the works they own, are replicated by differences in their relation to the ‘economy’. The ‘sales galleries’ (e.g. Beaubourg), having no ‘stable’ of their own, exhibit in relatively eclectic fashion painters of very different periods, schools and ages (abstracts as well as post-surrealists, a few European hyper-realists, some new realists), i.e. works whose greater ‘accessibility’ (owing to their more classic status or their ‘decorative’ potential) can find purchasers outside the circle of professional and semi-professional collectors (among the ‘jet-set executives’ and ‘trendy industrialists’, as an informant put it). This enables them to pick out and attract a fraction of the avant-garde painters who have already been ‘noticed’ by offering them a slightly compromising form of consecration, i.e. a market in which the prices are much higher than in the avant-garde galleries. By contrast, galleries like Sonnabend, Denise René or Durand-Ruel, which mark dates in the history of painting because they have been able in their time to assemble a ‘school’, are characterized by a *systematic slant*. Thus in the succession of painters presented by the Sonnabend gallery one can see the logic of an artistic development which leads from the ‘new American painting’ and pop art, with painters such as Rauschenberg, Jaspers Johns, Jim Dine, to Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Wesselman, Rosenquist, Warhol, sometimes classified under the label minimal art, and to the most recent innovations of *art pauvre*, conceptual art and art by correspondence. Likewise, there is a clear connection between the geometric abstraction which made the name of the Denise René gallery (founded in 1945 and inaugurated with a Vasarely exhibition) and kinetic art, with artists such as Max Bill and Vasarely forming a sort of link between the visual experiments of the inter-war years (especially the Bauhaus) and the optical and technological experiments of the new generation.

RAYMONDE MOULIN, THE PARADOX OF RARITY: PHOTOGRAPHY

Excerpts (pp. 457–63) from “The Genesis of the Rarity of Art,” *Art in Translation* 3, no. 4 (2011): 441–71. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd. London, tandfonline.com.

At its outset, photography was placed in a context of rarity due to technology, but at the same time found itself in a position of artistic ignominy—again due precisely to its technical mode of operation. [. . .]

The controversy over photography's status, and whether it pertained to the categories of "industrial arts" or "fine arts," was a subject of great debate in the nineteenth century (and is as yet, we feel, to be fully explored) that had a bearing on the relationship between art and industry. It is not possible here to retrace the complete history of debate over the status of photography from the nineteenth century to the present day. We will . . . simply make one or two remarks, with the particular aim of stating that the recognition of photography as a work of art, even if it was not unanimous, nor without ambiguity, is nonetheless a nineteenth-century legacy—despite Baudelaire's famous diatribe against naturalism and photography, and the idiotic confusion between art and industry. [. . .]

Independent of the photography sold by "photo shops," the photography market currently comprises two sectors. These cannot be compared in terms of transaction figures, but the second sector offers considerable interest in our present context. The first market is that of reproduction rights: the photographer sells the photography reproduction rights, which is to say, according to the law of March 11, 1957, on artistic ownership, the royalties. The second market is that of prints: the photographer sells objects, which are the photographic prints. [. . .]

The intermediaries are the paint galleries, photograph galleries, brokers, and those in charge of public sales (auctioneers). The major prizes are those of the United States, where distribution and specialized marketing systems were first set in place. If one considers and compares the number of columns relating to photography in the major newspapers, the number of specialist magazines, the number of exhibitions (200 in 1972), the sum of public sales, and the significance of the buyers (in particular museums and universities), the United States is first in the list and is the top place for international validation. In a market of an international nature like that of painting, it is clear that many places have seen photograph galleries multiply and art galleries with dedicated photography areas increase; these include London, Rome, Paris, the large German towns, Japan, and South America.

All leaders of the photographic print market, together with a small number of photographers (those who, belonging to the generation of under-40s, would like there to be no other photographic practice than that which leads to the print as work of art), a small number of curators and museum directors (those who benefit reciprocally from the highest recognition as connoisseurs), dealers and gallery directors (the last conferring more importance than the first on what they call "cultural engagement"; that is to say, exhibitions), and finally, collectors (of greatest to smallest means, "passionate" art lovers and/or potential speculators), all support the theory of effective rarity, which is imposed by the means of production of the original print.

Industry intervenes both before (with the photographic industry of instruments and films) and sometimes after, with industrial printing techniques. Between these two moments, the photographic print is the result of an artisan process consisting of three stages: the taking of the shot, the development of the negative, and the printing. Photographers who hold art to be the product of individual work carry out all three operations. The product of such actions may or may not be recognized as artistic beyond the studio: the verdict comes from the international community of connoisseurs, whose authority will impact on the market.

In the micro-sphere of the print market, reference to the unique print is constant. Metaphors inspired by artistic practices such as painting, engraving, and sculpture also occur: “light is the photographer’s clay.” Printing is held to be a long and difficult operation that in certain cases involves physical or chemical treatments reminiscent of painters’ “mixing”; as Paul Strand, whose printing contributed to his success, said, “every photo is unique.” Market regulars like to say that the difficulty arises more out of the excessive rarity of original print-runs: print-runs, numbered on the model of the engraving and usually fixed at twenty-five or thirty copies, are imaginary in the sense that it would be almost impossible to obtain several original print-runs from those new fanatics of the unique that certain photographers have now become.

By far the most important criterion for a plastic work of art’s originality (1957 law) is its individual execution, which precisely expresses the dominating artistic ideology. Some variations are accepted with respect to a photographic print or an engraving, but this is as long as everything possible is done to protect the principle. The definition of an authorized edition, such as given in fiscal legislation, does not concern photography. And if the custom of restricted editions is now becoming established, it is nonetheless not exclusive. Many very well-known photographers do not undertake to print their photographs, yet as soon as they are signed, they are considered to be original. In signing a photograph, the person who took the shot acknowledges it as being in conformity with his idea. Restricting the print-runs of prints sold as originals was not usual practice within the generation of the great photographers such as Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, and Doisneau.

We should add that the distinction between an original work and its reproduction is particularly difficult to establish in the area of photography. A photograph of a painting or an engraving is a reproduction, but is no longer an engraving, whereas the photograph of a photograph is a reproduction of the same nature as the original: a duplicate—negative taken from a negative or a print—is a copy, but remains a photograph. One example is enough to justify, in monetary terms, the differences between types of practice. A photograph by Imogen Cunningham, printed by herself, was in 1977 worth approximately \$400; when it was printed by a laboratory, but signed, it was worth \$200, when it was printed after her death, it was valued at \$150.

The definition of an original print, in usual market terms, carries certain ambiguities due to the fact that its very nature is analogous. By analogy with the plastic work of art (painting, sculpture, or engraving), originality assumes that the work is personally

executed by the artist, in all its stages; and by analogy with engraving, has a limited number of copies. As we have seen, infractions of one or the other of these principles occur frequently among well-known artists, but only on condition that the print is signed. Fame itself is the result of a complex system whereby two different kinds of photograph market interact. As a result of photography's elevation in the hierarchy of cultural legitimacy and its recognition both within and outside the area of artistic production, a community of experts has emerged (historians of photography, directors and curators of museums and libraries) and contributes to the establishment of a hierarchy of quality.

As in the painting market, one may already observe that photography—despite its relative youth—has two sectors in the print market. The old prints market combines several effects of rarity: original rarity (in particular in the case of the daguerreotype), residual rarity, rarity or uniqueness of the represented subject, and rarity of the artistic excellence as defined by photographic historians and museum directors—in particular, for France, those in the *Cabinet des Estampes* at the National Library in Paris. When all criteria of rarity are met (or at the very least, a large number of them), the price nears the absolute limit and the factors determining it are comparable to those applied to pre-modern paintings—on the condition that the possibility of reproducibility is overlooked. In the old print market, prices are more and more elevated, although they remain beneath those of pre-modern paintings. [. . .]

When the price is not fixed objectively, as it is after the death of a work's author, many factors intervene, which can contribute to the “launch” of a photographer, to methods of recognition, and to a rise in price. The main difference with respect to the contemporary painting market (other than reproducibility) rests with the dual photography market and to the various positions one photographer can occupy, on the one hand, in the press, illustration, and publishing market and in the print market, on the other. The reader should bear in mind that the development of the print market is not the sole product of a conscious or unconscious quest by market players with rarity as their objective. The lack of outlets in the market for large print-runs (given the crisis in the illustrated press) has been one of several favorable conditions that together have contributed to the rapid growth of the print market.

At a time when technical innovations enable huge print-runs and where photography is practiced by all social classes and age groups among the public, we are now witnessing a revival, in one of the photography markets, of the rarity of beginning. However, in no way is the process the same. Photography in its early stages was frustrated by being the prisoner of faltering techniques, whereas today's photography is in revolt against a technology that overwhelms. And the question has to be raised as to whether the celebration of photographic rarity does not represent an unconscious quest for the ultimate “artistic certificate.” Photographic prints belong to the category of reproducible goods. Because of their technical production, they are multiples, and as merchandise cannot be assimilated either to unique works of art, produced by artisanship, or to pre-industrial forms of

reproduction such as engraving. As soon as the photographic print market began to structure itself according to the model of the artworks market—in the accepted sense of the term—the contradiction between uniqueness and multiplicity, rarity and abundance, and art and industry, exploded. To drive the photographic print, as merchandise, into the category of artworks, one must firstly cleanse it of its original sin of reproducibility. If the photograph currently appears to be winning its case before the tribunal of art (on the economic grounds that the art market represents), it is at the cost of a massive technological Malthusianism and a cult-like regression. But what significance and what influence might a victory have that is gained before a tribunal that the very invention of photography disqualified? In the artistic world of the avant-garde, artists can turn to photography to strengthen a step that is anti-art. The photographic print, on the contrary, in refusing the stigma of reproduction and the “mark” of industry (although large companies do figure on the list of silent partners who intervene in the market), holds itself up as being in accordance with the inherited definition of a work of art. Nevertheless, an original print signed by a professional photographer is positioned at a lower price than the most self-proclaimed-as-ordinary-photograph signed by a painter-artist. In these complicated games where rarity is the issue, the rarity of the artist’s signature remains more socially valuable than the photographer’s.

OLAV VELTHUIS, SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF PRICES

Excerpts (pp. 158–64) from “Symbolic Meanings of Prices,” in *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 158–78. Copyright © 2007 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission.

Pricing . . . is not just an economic, but also a signifying act: by distinguishing different types of prices or by identifying auction and gallery prices with different sets of values, art dealers turn pricing into a meaningful activity. [. . .] The purpose of [this] chapter is to address two major anomalies of the price mechanism with the meaningful, symbolic, or expressive dimension of prices in mind. The first anomaly is the existence of a strong taboo on price decreases. This taboo has been widely recognized in academic literature on the art market, it appears in artists’ guides to the market, and it is universally acknowledged by the dealers I interviewed. [. . .] In fact, art dealers and artists seem to behave more like *price* than *profit* maximizers. In their everyday models of the art market, the concept of price elasticity, which is so important in academic economic thinking, plays a subordinate role. From an economic perspective this may make sense as far as the negative effect of price decreases on the investment potential of art is concerned. The finding must also be puzzling for neoclassical economists, however, since it inhibits the movement of the market into equilibrium: if lowering prices is really impossible, the market cannot be cleared in case of excess supply. [. . .]

The second anomaly [. . .] is the fact that artworks of the same size, within the oeuvre of one artist, almost invariably have the same market price. [. . .]

The rule of pricing according to size is anomalous, since it implies that art dealers miss out on a price premium on works they expect to sell more easily; they fail to exploit excess demand for some works, in other words. This is indeed acknowledged by the dealers I interviewed. As one of them put it: “there is always somebody’s favorite piece in the show that you can sell ten times over.”. . . If dealers claim to be concerned about quality, why do they refrain from expressing those concerns in the prices they set? Why do they say, as one of my respondents did, that “[i]t is a code in the gallery circuit to conceal which artworks you value higher than others”? In fact, the same dealers who distinguished themselves sharply from the immorality of the secondary market had to acknowledge that secondary market dealers *do* price according to quality. [. . .]

How does the price mechanism contribute to the audience’s valuation of an artwork? When setting prices, dealers take into account that collectors make inferences about the quality of the work from its relative price or from a price change. First of all, the danger of low prices, dealers think, is that collectors do not take the work seriously. If a work is priced lower than the conventional or expected price level, collectors may be pleased, but at the same time it incites distrust about the quality of the work. As an American dealer said: “Sometimes you can find work that is greatly undervalued, and people say ‘wow, is that only that price?’ [Confidential tone:] That makes them nervous, they think it should be a higher price. It is a psychological factor.”

The second manifestation of the constructive, meaningful role of prices is encapsulated in the script of pricing according to size. The rationale to avoid pricing works of the same size differently is that by allowing for price differences, dealers would convey implicit messages about differences in quality of the works exhibited. Such messages are avoided for a number of reasons. To begin with, they would create a sense of disorder in a market where uncertainty already reigns. As one dealer put it: “Let me miss out on that upper part of the price I am not able to ask. Stability is more important than that extra bit of money.” Also, many dealers question whether their own value judgments are similar to those of their customers; they said that they cannot predict how collectors will evaluate individual pieces in a show. By pricing all artworks equally, dealers seek to let buyers decide themselves what they like. [. . .] Finally, a straightforward economic rationale for the size script is that attaching a higher price to one work may complicate selling the lower-priced works in a show. One of my respondents, for instance, admitted that pricing according to size rather than quality means that “the real hits” are less expensive than they could be, but, he continued, “you violate another system if you would comply with that. You will have a more difficult time selling the rest. In fact, you reconfirm that the rest is less desirable.”

The third contribution of prices to the construction of value is related to price changes rather than price differences or absolute price levels. Contrary to other markets, including

those for cultural products such as literature or music, success on the art market is measured in terms of rising prices rather than rising sales. An increase in the price level of an artist's work therefore conveys the message that her career is developing or that her art is being accepted in the art world; simultaneously, it makes collectors feel secure about the acquisitions which they have made in the past or which they intend to make in the future.

The positive meanings of increases encourage dealers to be price rather than profit maximizers: since high prices are perceived as a sign of success, dealers and artists have an incentive to actively produce scarcity. This provides a tentative explanation for the fact that galleries, both in the past and in the present, deliberately restrict the number of works they hang in an exhibition (Grampp 1989, 86–87; Gee 1981); for the fact that even highly successful artists like Mark Rothko, Francis Bacon, or Picasso left a large number of works when they died; and for the fact that art dealers are eager to restrict the edition size of photographs and prints. All these practices suggest that artists and their dealers aim at maximizing prices.

The opposite argument applies to price decreases. Price decreases affect more than just the return on investing in art. In fact, such a direct economic effect was not even mentioned in the interviews. Instead, dealers were concerned about the meanings which those decreases convey to both artists and collectors. However strong the economic logic of a price decrease may be, by lowering the price an art dealer conveys a message about the worth of an artist's work and thereby affects her self-esteem. Says an *éminence grise* of the New York gallery scene: “[A price decrease] has a caustic reverberation. If the artist goes down, it means the gallery has lost confidence in him, or the collectors have lost confidence, or he lost his audience. Those are the implications, and you must never allow for those implications, because if you continue to exhibit him, it means that you continue to have faith in him. And if you continue to have faith in him, that means you believe that the artist's progress is ongoing. It is injurious to an artist if he finds that he cannot sustain his price level. That is a blow to his self-esteem.” Indeed, even the most well-known dealers I interviewed, representing famous artists who sell their work to museums for prices well over \$100,000, confirmed that prices are a “personality issue”: they seriously affect the pride of artists.

Price decreases generate comparable meanings for collectors. They create “suspicion in the audience,” as one dealer put it; as a result, collectors will “distrust your instincts” and will “lose faith.” If the collectors' belief in the artistic value of the work is harmed because of a price decrease, the consequences can be dramatic. One dealer said that “if [the price] is going down, they will start asking what's wrong with it. That can have a backlash and can destroy a career at the beginning.” Another dealer confirmed with regret that, when an artist has hardly been selling for a considerable amount of time, “[y]ou drop the artist, because you cannot drop the price.” Art dealers are particularly reluctant to decrease prices, since they expect that information about such decreases spreads fast in the art world.

The dramatic consequences of price decreases on the collector's appraisal, combined with the effect they have on the artist's self-esteem, shed light on the script of starting low which I discussed before. Cultural economists have argued that dealers "underprice" artworks, since it is difficult to attract the one buyer willing to pay the exact equilibrium price on a thin market like the art market. The alternative explanation which my interviews suggest is that the taboo on decreasing prices generates an incentive for galleries to underprice from the outset, and increase prices as slowly as possible. Nevertheless, in the unfortunate case of prices that are higher than the market "bears," there is a repertoire of strategies to decrease prices less visibly. The repertoire lacks the legitimacy of most other pricing decisions, which means that dealers only make use of it in emergency situations. First of all, the size of the work which the artist and the dealer select for an exhibition can be increased while keeping prices on the same level; *de facto* this reduces the selling price per unit of size, albeit in a concealed way. The second strategy is to "restructure" the prices of an artist's work once he changes gallery. If an artist, either voluntarily or involuntarily, leaves a gallery and finds representation at another one, the taboo on price decreases is temporarily annulled, which makes it legitimate to start from scratch with prices. [. . .]

The third component of the emergency repertoire which I encountered is to decrease prices when an artist experiments with a new technique or develops a new body of work. Finally, the most frequently used technique to achieve price decreases is to award discounts. Indeed, whereas courtesy and museum discounts serve a relational purpose . . . flexibility discounts are given in order to make sales. Although such flexibility discounts are only given when the market dictates it, they provide dealers the best of both worlds: on the one hand, they can maintain high prices that signal quality, while on the other hand, dealers reaffirm social ties to collectors.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, ART . . . CONTEMPORARY OF ITSELF

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Interface and performance: the two leitmotifs of today.

In performance, all forms of expression are combined: the plastic arts, photography, videos, installations, interactive screens. This vertical and horizontal, aesthetic and commercial diversification is now part of the work, and the work's original core is beyond repair.

A (non-) event like *The Matrix* serves as a perfect example: it is the very model of a global installation, of a total world event. Not only the film, which is only an excuse to some extent, but the spin-off products, the simultaneous projection at all points of the

globe and the millions of spectators themselves who are inextricably part of it. We are all, from a global and interactive point of view, actors in this total world event.

Photography has the same problem when we decide to make it multimedia by adding to it all the resources of montage, collage, digital effects, computer generated imagery, etc. This opening onto the infinite, this deregulation leads precisely to the death of photography by raising it to the level of performance.

In this universal mixture, each register loses its specificity—just as every individual loses his or her sovereignty in networks and interaction—like reality and image, art and reality lose their respective force when they cease to be differential poles.

Ever since the 19th century, art has wanted to be useless. It turned this uselessness into a reason for praise (which was not true of classical art where, in a world that was not yet real or objective, usefulness was not even considered).

By extension of this principle, making any object useless would be enough to make it a work of art. This is precisely what the readymade does when it merely divests an object of its function, without changing anything about it, to turn it into a museum piece. It is sufficient to make reality itself a useless function to turn it into an art object, prey to the all-consuming aesthetic of banality.

By the same token, older things, coming from the past and therefore useless, automatically acquire an aesthetic aura. Their displacement in time is the equivalent of Duchamp's gesture; they become readymades as well, nostalgic vestiges resuscitated in our museum universe.

One could extrapolate this aesthetic transformation to material production as a whole. As soon as it reaches a level where it can no longer be exchanged in terms of social wealth, it becomes a giant surrealist object, seized by an all-consuming aesthetic and is included everywhere in a sort of virtual museum. Like for the readymade, an in-situ museification in the form of dormant industry for every technical waste land.

The logic of uselessness could only lead contemporary art to a predilection for waste—that which is useless by definition. Through refuse, the figuration of refuse, the obsession with refuse, art strives to display its own uselessness. It presents its non-use value, its non-exchange value—while still being sold at very high prices.

There is a contradiction here. *Uselessness has no value in itself*. It is a secondary symptom. And by sacrificing its implications to this negative quality, art goes astray in a useless gratuitousness. The scenario is similar for nullity, the claim of nonsense, insignificance, banality, all a sign of elevated aesthetic pretense.

Anti-art in all its forms attempts to escape the aesthetic dimension. But ever since the readymade annexed banality, all that is finished. The innocence of nonsense, of the non-figurative, abjection and dissidence is over.

Everything that contemporary art would like to be or become again only reinforces the inevitably aesthetic character of this anti-art.

Art has always denied itself. But it did it before out of excess, exalting in the play of its disappearance. Today, it denies itself by default—worse yet, it denies its own death.

Art immerses itself in reality instead of becoming the agent symbolically assassinating reality, instead of being the magical agent of its disappearance.

The paradox is that the closer it comes to this phenomenal confusion, to this nullity as art, the more it is overvalued and credited. To such an extent that, to paraphrase Elias Canetti, we have reached the point where nothing is beautiful or ugly, we have crossed this point without realizing it, and if we are unable to find this blind spot again, we will continue to pursue the current destruction of art.

What is this useless function good for in the end?

What does it deliver us from with its very uselessness?

Like politicians, who relieve us of the bothersome responsibility of power, contemporary art, with its incoherent artifice, relieves us of the grasp of meaning through the spectacle of nonsense. This explains its proliferation: independent of any aesthetic value, it is ensured of prospering in function of its insignificance and vanity. Just as politicians persist despite the absence of any representation or credibility. Art and the art market therefore flourish to the extent that they decay: they are the modern charnel houses of culture and simulacra.

It is therefore absurd to say that contemporary art is null and that all of this is worthless since that is its vital function: to illustrate our uselessness and our absurdity. Or even better: to use this decay as its capital while at the same time exorcising it as a spectacle.

If, as some propose, the function of art was to make life more interesting than art, then we must lose this illusion. I have the impression that a good portion of art today is conspiring in a process of deterrence, a work of mourning the image and the imaginary, a work of aesthetic mourning. This work usually fails, leading to the general melancholy of the artistic sphere, which seems to survive by recycling its history and its vestiges.

Yet art and aesthetics are not the only ones doomed to this melancholy destiny of living, not above their means, but beyond their ends.