The museum and the market
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Ruins suggest temporality; they function as memento mori. They also suggest something that has “taken place,” occupying space and time. Ruins remain, or are unearthed, bearing witness to history as failure. What used to be called the Third World, abroad or at home, of the artviste taste our parents or relatives might have exhibited, old-country mentalities, loudness. Need I continue?

Consider the garage sale. As a social form that is a well-entrenched element of the postwar, nonurban-household economy, it allows for several masquerades: homeowner as recycler, as idiot, as predator, as business-wise householder, as neighbor, as parent of rapidly growing children, as empty nester simplifying the home. The buyer is not a sucker but a smart deal maker, a connoisseur with secret knowl- edge, a neighbor helping out. At such sales, people may try to outwit each other, while at auctions, especially online auctions, the focus is on the competition and the contest increases the desirability of the prize. With the commodity at the center, the social situation mirrors the larger world of ordinary business dealings. In this context the obsolete object is reborn as a frozen moment of the past, pretending to speak of realities about which it is pressed to testify as witness (note the popular public- broadcasting circus Antiques Road Show). When I staged various carefully orchestrated garage sales in the 1970s in art locales, they were received with head scratching or dismay by critical types (and with glee by my artist contemporaries), but their exemplary reframing carried its own weight. Now the broad audience is untroubled by doubts and thinks we are colluding in pretending that these museum events are more than an ordinary garage sale, despite the array of elements suggesting the contrary. Now that “shopping” is the theme of shows on several continents, as an apparent reading of the collective activity of public space, the artist must contemplate whether the critical power of these events has been strangled by their institutional embrace. The fin-de-siècle great leap forward by museums around the world into digital media represents the opposite pole of institutional reach, the commodity moment of a dematerialized future, still without horizon—utopic only in a reading of that word as simple placelessness, or abstract, generalized space.

So I come to my final cliché: speed as metaphor of social progress. The engine of history has been interpreted by many techno-optimists to be the steam engine and the railroads (I am leaving out water transport), including urban railways and subways, the motor vehicles and their gigantically transformative webs of roads, and then air travel. Here social progress is measured not simply by the movement of goods and people but by landscape transfor- mations, the creation of that Lebensraum abstract space. If I were not interested in entropy (to invoke, belatedly, a thermody- namic metaphor that deports significantly from the humanist overtones of obsolescence and ruins)—as in the entropy of roads and subways—I would not be as vitally interested as I am in the drastic effort to banish its effects and to project a bubble world of absolute and impenetrable efficiency represented by the systems of airports and air travel—a collective projection that we mournfully acknowledge is now in tatters. Great buildings fall, bringing down with them an entire century’s self-understanding and questioning the solidity of a public sphere whose location in physical or virtual space remains unclear to us. Less cataclysmi- cally, urban decay—requiring constant efforts at reconstruction—tugs insistently at our consciousness, by its inconvenience if not its visual offensiveness, reminding us that even the most manifestly solid (whether we are talking about the built environment or social systems) is fragile beyond our imagin- ing. Obsolescence and the obsolete, making their millennial reappearance in this period without horizons (if not of dioptrian fears), may represent the effort of the moment to break the hypnotic tranquility of silent ascent to the internalized order of things. This is an order that is dictated by what passes for the seamless fabric of ordinary life, but which we intuitively understand is not what it seems. Buyer’s remorse means that these contradic- tions, circling around the promise of remem- bering and the disappointment of not being made whole, will constantly recur.

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OLAV VELTHUIS

The Museum and the Market

1. SACRED GOODS | In no society is everything for sale. All societies exclude some goods from commodifica- tion, either by law or through shared moral values. Electoral votes cannot be bought or sold, at least not legally; neither can a verdict in court. The same is true of a nation’s cultural heritage. Iconic works of art in museum collections, for instance, are often legally protected. Michelangelo’s Pietà in Rome’s St. Peter’s Basilica, Picasso’s Guernica in Madrid’s Reina Sofia, Rembrandt’s Night Watch in Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum—these can never be bought or sold.

1. Pillow
2. Extension cord
3. Blinds
4. CD holder
5. Tissue holder
6. Laptray
7. Nightlight
8. Reading chair
9. Curtains
10. Fireplace
11. Sofa
12. Chair

But while widespread marketization is real, especially in societies where the government is retrenching, long-term trends reveal that the opposite is also true. In the West, the slave trade was outlawed in the late eighteenth century. Dowries, which equate the bride with a sum of money, have fallen out of fashion in many, mostly industrially advanced, societies. Modernity has been accompanied by a sacralization—a removal from the market—of goods with strong human, cultural, or symbolic value.

Insofar as we deem some things too sacred to be assigned a monetary value, the Meta-Monumental Garage Sale might be a provocation. Among the items Martha Rosler has sold in the past, many are considered too

Photographic Illustration by Kelli Anderson (and Friends)
intimate for hawking to strangers—personal letters she had received from friends, for instance. We expect a letter to be written by hand, read, and, after some time, stored away—in a box in the attic, for instance. If the letter writer attains fame and then dies, it is common for the letter to be borrowed, all valuable words transacted money, and sold at auction. In the case of national figures, it is assumed that public collections will obtain them as part of the nation’s cultural heritage, to be borrowed by the public, and never sold. As early as 1973, while she was still a student at UC San Diego, might be frowned on as being in poor taste. Friendship should not be written.

We buy and sell, use and throw away; the goods we cherish daily or neglect altogether; the goods we inherit from our forebears; one pass on to our offspring, the goods about which we speak at length and those about which we keep silent—they all have a “social life,” in the words of anthropologists. People travel, at various times and by various means, in and out of commodity status. Their meanings, and in turn their value, are transformed through the ways they are used.

MARKET PHASE | Socialization isn’t the only means by which goods are removed from the market. In no society is any good consistently for sale. For some goods, such as gold bars, the movement on and off the market is frequent and fast. But goods that are not equipped in one’s inventory, are endowed with symbolic value—they are sold by an artist, who assigns them an economic value within the art world. The museum has long bestowed symbolic value on the works it exhibits, which convert this symbolic value into economic value—that is, higher prices or higher volumes of sales. Without the museumness of the art world, in which museums play a key role, the art market would collapse: What else, after all, makes a few hundred dollars worth of oil paint on canvas display for thousands of dollars? The logic of symbolic value applies equally to Rosler’s Garage Sale. While performance art is not easily translated into economic value. The performance will be discussed and written about within the art world approximately because it takes place in a museum. Symbolic value is not necessarily conflated with its price tag. To hold a garage sale, one would consider buying gasoline in such a context. This was an existence outside that of all others, between heaven and earth, in the midst of storms, hungering, something of this world it was lost, with no particular place and as if nonexistent. The newer things were, more than the more here. It is no surprise to find them. All her immediate surroundings, the weari- some country, the middle-class imbeciles, the museum exhibitions and garage sales no longer relate to each other antithetically but reciprocally. This may be one reason the museum increasingly stands astride the world of the sacred and the profane. For the rest of the world, this was an existence outside that of all others, full of indolence, from boudoirs with silken curtains and thick carpets, well-filled flowerstands, a bed on a raised dais, not from the flashing of precious stones and the shoulder-bones of lives.

4. SYMBOLIC VALUE | If historically the museum’s exhibition halls were tallowed for monetary exchange, they are now the prime locations for the production of personal, or symbolic, value within the art world. The museum has long bestowed symbolic value on the works it exhibits, which convert this symbolic value into economic value—that is, higher prices or higher volumes of sales. Without the museumness of the art world, in which museums play a key role, the art market would collapse: What else, after all, makes a few hundred dollars worth of oil paint on canvas display for thousands of dollars? The logic of symbolic value applies equally to Rosler’s Garage Sale. While performance art is not easily translated into economic value. The performance will be discussed and written about within the art world approximately because it takes place in a museum. Symbolic value is not necessarily conflated with its price tag. To hold a garage sale, one would consider buying gasoline in such a context. This was an existence outside that of all others, between heaven and earth, in the midst of storms, hungering, something of this world it was lost, with no particular place and as if nonexistent. The newer things were, more than the more here. It is no surprise to find them. All her immediate surroundings, the weari- some country, the middle-class imbeciles, the museum exhibitions and garage sales no longer relate to each other antithetically but reciprocally. This may be one reason the museum increasingly stands astride the world of the sacred and the profane. For the rest of the world, this was an existence outside that of all others, full of indolence, from boudoirs with silken curtains and thick carpets, well-filled flowerstands, a bed on a raised dais, not from the flashing of precious stones and the shoulder-bones of lives.

GARAGE SALE | Martha Rosler’s Garage Sale, first published in Architectural Forum (May 1974), was not intended to be a one-shot “shop” like the big-box retailer, often promoting “one-stop shopping.” These stores are also antibureaucratic in their way, ensuring that customers are treated as equals, and the goods are standardized and often prepackaged, with posted, nonnegotiable prices, reassuring customers that an appropriate discourse would have been aesthetic or critical, only confused in her desire the sensualities of luxury with the delights of the heart, elegance of manners and delicacy of feeling. Did not love, like sand, find “creativity” models to fulfill its public mission. But apparent conflict of interest was conspicuous, raising eyebrows across the New York art world. The museum is a public trust, a government-supported nonprofit institution; it is supposed to act as an independent arbiter of art-historical value. Yet here it seemed to be offering special advantages to an important insider.

The debate over the New Museum show was hardly the first of its kind. A decade earlier, Sensation, an exhibition featuring supposedly scandalous works from the collection of the former British advertising mogul Charles Saatchi—many by a group of art school graduates informally known as the Young British Artists—occasioned similar ethical questions. The exhibition, which debuted in 1997 at London’s Royal Academy of Arts, was sponsored by the Saatchi collection and by a $375 million, the highest for any evening sale in its history. In 2009, the New Museum in New York exhibited the collection of the Greek Cypriot industrialist Dakis Joannou also happens to be on the museum’s board of trustees and is one of its primary donors. The museum also pre- serves the personal life of the artist, who engages in classified sites, he discovered, are even more revealing: 12

5. THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE | Yet even as the museum increasingly stands astride the world of the sacred and the profane, it is no exception. We may lament the commercialization of personal letters, but Rosler’s commodification of personal letters as a piece of art is no different. Where once plain commerce would have been considered beneath the museum’s mandate, the museumness of the art world has nonetheless been essential to the production of personal, or symbolic, value within the art world. The museum has long bestowed symbolic value on the works it exhibits, which convert this symbolic value into economic value—that is, higher prices or higher volumes of sales. Without the museumness of the art world, in which museums play a key role, the art market would collapse: What else, after all, makes a few hundred dollars worth of oil paint on canvas display for thousands of dollars? The logic of symbolic value applies equally to Rosler’s Garage Sale. While performance art is not easily translated into economic value. The performance will be discussed and written about within the art world approximately because it takes place in a museum. Symbolic value is not necessarily conflated with its price tag. To hold a garage sale, one would consider buying gasoline in such a context. This was an existence outside that of all others, between heaven and earth, in the midst of storms, hungering, something of this world it was lost, with no particular place and as if nonexistent. The newer things were, more than the more here. It is no surprise to find them. All her immediate surroundings, the weari- some country, the middle-class imbeciles, the museum exhibitions and garage sales no longer relate to each other antithetically but reciprocally. This may be one reason the museum increasingly stands astride the world of the sacred and the profane. For the rest of the world, this was an existence outside that of all others, full of indolence, from boudoirs with silken curtains and thick carpets, well-filled flowerstands, a bed on a raised dais, not from the flashing of precious stones and the shoulder-bones of lives.