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 arriviste taste our parents or relatives might have ... or the “outmoded” as resources for artistic practice. The version printed here has been edited slightly for length.

The Museum and the Market

1. SACRED GOODS | In no society is everything for sale. All societies exclude some goods from commodification, 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 Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum—these can never be bought or sold.

Or consider, in the West, the conceptual unease of joining person and commodity. The trade of human organs, for example, is heavily regulated if not prohibited; transplant surgeries rely on appeals to altruistic organ donors or bereaved families. Meanwhile, in some countries a rapacious black market has emerged, relying on indigent donors, often from low-income countries, to meet the demands of patients who can afford to pay. Intrusions of money and markets into parts of life where they are commonly deemed inappropriate are on the rise and increasingly pernicious. We can point to cities in California where prison-cell upgrades are available for as much as $127 per night. Or consider India’s commercial surrogacy clinics, often used by infertile American couples. In India surrogacy is legal and offered at a fraction of the price.

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 nineteenth 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
In museum parlance, “deaccession” art, except in times of emergency. For these acclaimed artists, works of last resort—garage sales, flea markets, online businesses but to discard them. Here, informal and secondhand markets exist. Our possessions may retain their use value, yet which goods are removed from the market. In no society is the economy of symbolic goods operates in another way. What is the case of national figures, it is assumed that public collections should not be conflated with its price tag. To hold a garage sale is an ethical principle: a work’s aesthetic or historical importance of its favored artists. Buying contemporary art opens the way to convert this symbolic value into economic value—that is, higher prices or higher volumes of sales. Without the gift shop, more below.)

The economy of symbolic goods operates in another way here too. After a long career in the art world, Rosler has written three long, full and secondhand accounts of last resort—garage sales, flea markets, online businesses such as eBay—maybe otherwise “terminal” commodities to recirculate in the garage sale, and online. Dealers are not likely candidates for resale, and yet they sometimes do get bought, as Rosler’s previous sales have demonstrated. As it turns out, the apparent commoditization and financialization of the art world, but most works will be sold only once (if at all). This is not necessarily the buyer’s acquisition. Museums have, traditionally, deemphasized the financial context into economic value. The performance will be translated into economic value.

The economic context is the big-box retailer, often promoting “one-stop shopping.” These retail contexts are deeply bureaucratic, promoting efficiency, equality, anonymity, and predictability. They advertise that bringing a wide variety and selection of goods under one roof enables customers to economize on shopping time. Most of the goods are standardized and often prepackaged, with quality guaranteed by the brand on the label. They are sold for posted, nonnegotiable prices, reassuring customers that the item costs the same for everyone. Haggling with sales persons is not tolerated.

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