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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 Madrid's Reina Sofia, Rembrandt's *Night Watch* in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum—these can never be bought or sold.

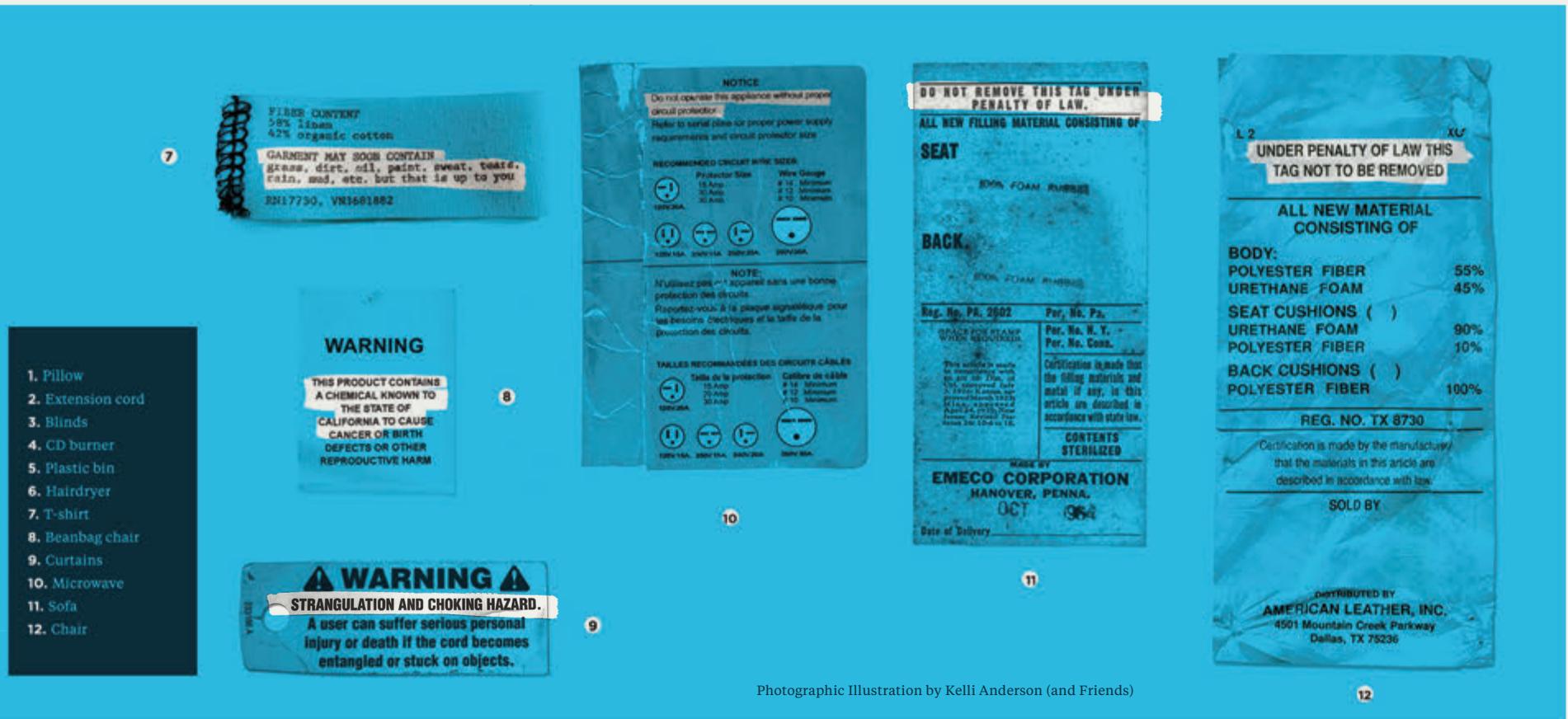
Or consider, in the West, the conceptual unease of joining person and commodity. The trade of human organs, for example, is heavily regulated if not prohibited;

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 **NOT EVERYTHING IS FOR SALE.** 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



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, sent, received, read, reread, 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 transformed into a “collectible” 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.) But Rosler’s commodification of personal letters 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 wear a price tag.

The goods we buy and sell, use and throw away; the goods we cherish daily or neglect all together; the goods we inherit from our ancestors and 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 anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. They 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.

2. MARKET PHASE | Sacralization 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 for many of our personal possessions, no organized resale markets exist. Our possessions may retain their use value, yet when we no longer need or want them, we have little option but to discard them. Here, informal and secondhand markets of last resort—garage sales, flea markets, online businesses such as eBay—enable otherwise “terminal” commodities to reenter the market. Our used underwear and old diaphragms are not likely candidates for resale, and yet they sometimes do get bought, as Rosler’s previous sales have demonstrated.

Art is no exception. We may lament the commercialization and financialization of the art world, but most works will be sold only once (if at all). This is not necessarily of the buyer’s accord. Previously-owned modern or contemporary art is a hard sell, except for works belonging to a small group of internationally acclaimed artists that see new life on a secondary market dominated by auction houses, private collectors, and commercial galleries. For these acclaimed artists, works may be dispelled from the market forever when acquired for a museum’s permanent collection. Museums rarely resell or, in museum parlance, “deaccession” art, except in times of budgetary crisis, and the practice remains taboo.

3. COMMODITY CONTEXT | In no society can goods be sold anywhere. The context must be appropriate to what is being sold: that is, the physical space in which the transaction takes place, but also the application of cultural technologies (counters, cash registers, show cases, price tags) and social norms (dress codes, interaction rituals, speech patterns), all of which are specific to time and place. In some African countries, gasoline stations are frequently nothing more than a collection of glass bottles filled with gas on wooden tables along the side of the road. In Europe or the United States, no one would consider buying gasoline in such a context. (Although the recent gas crisis in the New York area demonstrates how quickly these norms can change and how disruptive it feels when they do.) In pre-Modern times churches were appropriate locations for conducting business; nowadays that would be hard to imagine.

In the US, one of the dominant commodity contexts 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 an item costs the same for everyone. Haggling with sales personnel is not tolerated.

These stores are also antibureaucratic in their way, designed as they are to feed unconscious desire and seduce customers into making irrational purchases—things they had not wanted before and may not need afterward. This is in contrast to the garage sale, which are neither bureaucratic—they are inefficient, offering goods of unpredictable quality and price—nor enchanting. Anonymity is also absent: the exchange between seller and buyer is more personal, and the “biography” of the item links both parties in ways more obvious than in a retail store.

So what does it mean for Rosler to hold a garage sale inside the museum’s walls? Indeed, it is no ordinary garage sale. Historically, museums provide a context in which commodities do not circulate; rather it is where they come to rest. Museums have, traditionally, deemphasized the financial value of objects, foregrounding instead their cultural and historical significance. In entering a museum collection, an artwork is removed from circulation and rendered singular and inalienable. Museum catalogues never mention a work’s monetary worth, because to do so would be to violate an ethical principle: a work’s aesthetic or historical importance should not be conflated with its price tag. To hold a garage sale

within a museum highlights opposing forces: those of the museum, where an object will never be sold again, its value having transcended money; and those of the garage sale, where objects with lapsed value are again introduced to the market. (About the gift shop, more below.)

4. SYMBOLIC VALUE | If historically the museum’s exhibition halls were too hallowed for monetary exchange, they have nonetheless been essential to the production of economic value within the art world. The museum has long bestowed symbolic value on the works it exhibits, which extends to other works in an artist’s oeuvre. Art dealers can convert this symbolic value into economic value—that is, higher prices or higher volumes of sales. Without the tastemaking machinery 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 worth thousands or even millions of dollars?

The logic of symbolic value applies equally to Rosler’s *Garage Sale*. While performance art is not easily commodified—what is there to sell?—the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, located as it is within the museum’s walls, becomes endowed with symbolic value that may increase the price of Rosler’s more tangible works. The performance will be discussed and written about within the art world precisely because it takes place in a museum. Symbolic value is translated into economic value.

The economy of symbolic goods operates in another way here too. After a long career in the art world, Rosler has acquired symbolic capital as an artist. Buying a tea kettle from Martha Rosler’s *Garage Sale* is not the same as buying a tea kettle from a neighbor’s front yard. The goods at Rosler’s sale are endowed with symbolic value—they are sold by an artist, and in a museum, no less. When, in 1973, Rosler offered her son’s baby shoes for sale, they were functional goods; today they are symbolic goods circulating in the art world.

5. THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE | Yet even as the *Garage Sale* exploits a key cultural opposition between an informal trade economy and the near-sacred, noncommercial space of the museum, it also points to the growing dissolution of that opposition. In the past decade, the museum has grown increasingly subject to the discipline of the market. The visible evidence lies, for instance, in museum gift shops that have expanded in size and scope and whose carefully considered locations often force visitors to walk through them after leaving an exhibition. (In the same way, boutiques resemble exhibition spaces more and more.) Museum galleries frequently display the corporate logos of sponsors, whereas at one time these logos would have been anathema in a museum space (unless they were part of an artwork). Designated free or reduced-fee entry days at museums are now common, as corporations subsidize the cost of escalating entrance fees. Take the retail giant Target, for instance, whose free events at New York museums have become a corporate signature—“Target First Saturdays” (i.e., the first Saturday night of each month) at the Brooklyn Museum; Target Third Saturdays at El Museo del Barrio; and of course the weekly Target Free Friday Night at the Museum of Modern Art.

The sacred character of museums has also been affected by the extraordinary growth of the contemporary-art market in the last decade. Between 2002 and 2006, sales at contemporary-art auctions more than quadrupled. In 2007, sales of contemporary art at the auction house Christie’s amounted to \$1.5 billion, 75 percent higher than the year before. At Sotheby’s, contemporary-art sales doubled in the same period to \$1.3 billion, making contemporary art the largest auction category for the first time in the company’s history. And while sales slowed after the financial crisis of 2008, today they have almost completely recovered. Earlier this month, Sotheby’s contemporary-art evening sale totaled \$375 million, the highest for any evening sale in its history. This growing force of wealthy private collectors has tightened its grip on the careers of artists and the art world’s valuation regimes, while public collecting institutions have had their budgets frozen or slashed. Museum directors have long lamented that great works of contemporary art are difficult to obtain because public institutions are routinely outbid by private collectors, but now the situation has worsened.

The wealthy, often nouveau-riche, private collectors responsible for the art-market boom have a tremendous surplus of economic capital but in many instances an equally large deficit of social and cultural capital, to use the terminology of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The quest for status leads some of these collectors to donate works from their private collections to public museums, an act that, in turn, transforms the collectors’ economic capital into social and cultural capital while raising the market value of the work of their favored artists. Buying contemporary art opens the gate to a prestigious, and previously inaccessible, social world—exhibition openings, gala events, exclusive parties, important artists and other collectors to call friends.

Yet not only does symbolic capital accrue in the museum, economic value accumulates as well. Increasingly, museums are borrowing artworks from private collections. The situation is win-win: Museums show works otherwise inaccessible, while the value of the private collection is enhanced,

FEVERS OF THE FLESH

by Gustave Flaubert, from *Madame Bovary* (1856), translated by Eleanor Marx-Aveling

Paris, more vague than the ocean, glimmered before Emma’s eyes in an atmosphere of vermillion. The many lives that stirred amid this tumult were, however, divided into parts, classed as distinct pictures. Emma perceived only two or three that hid from her all the rest, and in themselves represented all humanity. The world of ambassadors moved over polished floors in drawing rooms lined with mirrors, round oval tables covered with velvet and gold-fringed cloths. There were dresses with trains, deep mysteries, anguish hidden beneath smiles. Then came the society of the duchesses; all were pale; all got up at four o’clock; the women, poor angels, wore English point on their petticoats; and the men, unappreciated geniuses under a frivolous outward seeming, rode horses to death at pleasure parties, spent the summer season at Baden, and towards the forties married heiresses. In the private rooms of restaurants, where one sups after midnight by the light of wax candles, laughed the motley crowd of men of letters and actresses. They were prodigal as kings, full of ideal, ambitious, fantastic frenzy. This was an existence outside that of all others, between heaven and earth, in the midst of storms, having something of the sublime. For the rest of the world it was lost, with no particular place and as if nonexistent. The nearer things were, moreover, the more her thoughts turned away from them. All her immediate surroundings, the wearisome country, the middle-class imbeciles, the mediocrity of existence, seemed to her exceptional, a peculiar chance that had caught hold of her, while beyond stretched, as far as eye could see, an immense land of joys and passions. She confused in her desire the sensualities of luxury with the delights of the heart, elegance of manners with delicacy of sentiment. Did not love, like Indian plants, need a special soil, a particular temperature? Signs by moonlight, long embraces, tears flowing over yielded hands, all the fevers of the flesh and the languors of tenderness could not be separated from the balconies of great castles full of indolence, from boudoirs with silken curtains and thick carpets, well-filled flower-stands, a bed on a raised dais, nor from the flashing of precious stones and the shoulder-knots of liveries.

having received the museum’s stamp of prestige. But this process, if too blatant, may attract negative publicity.

In 2009, the New Museum in New York exhibited the collection of the Greek Cypriot industrialist Dakis Joannou. Joannou also happens to be on the museum’s board of trustees and is one of its primary donors. The museum claimed that difficult economic times forced it to find “creative” 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 Art, was sponsored by Christie’s auction house. In 1998, it traveled to Berlin’s Hamburger Bahnhof, and the following year to the Brooklyn Museum in New York City. In the two years between the London and New York exhibitions, Saatchi sold numerous works by artists featured in the show—at auction at Christie’s.

In other words, the museum increasingly stands astride the world of the sacred and the world of the profane (to use the Durkheimian distinction). Where once art was an object whose value could not be measured, where once the only appropriate discourse would have been aesthetic or critical, where once plain commerce would have been considered taboo, the market has started to creep in. In other words, museum exhibitions and garage sales no longer relate to each other antithetically but reciprocally. This may be one reason why curators have continued to invite Rosler to hold the work in their institutions, calling attention to the means and methods of monetization of contemporary art and the circulation of value within the museum’s walls.