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Priceless: a few notes about value in contemporary art.

The project “hard to sell, good to have” is aimed at opening a discussion about the relationship between contemporary art practices in the light of the market. While many of the works that were chosen for the exhibition directly reflect their status as commodities within a market as well as the process of their own evaluation, others are seemingly hard to commodify either because they are temporal and ephemeral, directed towards immateriality, or in other ways deemed “hard to sell.” In this context, it seems necessary to ask oneself once more what it means to produce art in an environment characterized by post-Fordist capitalism. From a present day perspective, it might seem that the question of whether it is possible to produce art which somehow manages to bypass the market and monetary evaluation has been posed throughout the history of modern art. If this were the case, one of the most famous examples would be the readymade, industrially produced, everyday objects in the form of art. Clearly the objects chosen have a very specific use value; they have a potential function beyond their aesthetics. Judged from today’s viewpoint, which is deeply ingrained in a society dominated by economical paradigms, Duchamp’s famous gamble could easily be read as the question of whether it is possible to create surplus value by declaring an ordinary, mass produced, everyday object into a piece of fine art, and many contemporary artists seem to read his gambit along these lines. This interpretation of the readymade as a strategy to enhance monetary value rather than the symbolic value of art, which was at stake in Duchamp’s enquiry, goes to show precisely to what extent the ideology of the market has infused present day thought. While Walter Benjamin could still ponder about the loss of the aura of a work of art through re-production, and Marcel Duchamp directly attacked the fetish





character of traditional fine art, it seems that contemporarily the differentiation between symbolic value and exchange value in relation to art has lost its meaning. In the following I would like to pose the question of how this implosion of values can be understood, and present a few examples of how contemporary artists engage with this issue.

As Baudrillard has demonstrated in his "for a critique of the political economy of the sign," fetishism depends on a belief system that maintains the notion of a false consciousness presupposed by a true consciousness, and consequently the possibility to know the "true" value and meaning of a commodity.¹ This is where Marx's famous attempt to de-fetishize the commodity and to re-establish its (true) use value is bound to become problematic, since, as Baudrillard argues, the use value of commodities was always expressed as exchange value and the idea of an essential referent outside of the system of evaluation amounts to a myth. In other words, as Wittgenstein demonstrated, the meaning of a sign emerges from its use in the overall framework of signs, not in reference to a "mythical" outside referent. The process of establishing value, in Baudrillard's sense, had to be understood as belonging to the regime of signs. This critique of Marxist economical analysis also reflected a shift in production, which entered the stage of history with post-Fordism. With this paradigmatic shift, the exchange value of a commodity is increasingly dependent on its capability to engender symbolic value. As we are well aware, the exchange value of a pair of sneakers, to a large degree, is determined by the complex mediated narratives crystallized in the brand. Vicente Verdú writes, "nothing is any longer purely instrumental. All use value is doubled by its exchange value, by its symbolic representational value, by its capacity for social and psychological interaction."²

In this respect, works of fine art can be regarded as the perfect prototypes for these kinds of commodities since their use value is always overshadowed by their symbolic value, and they are, in this sense, ideal hosts for social and psychological interaction. Thus, not surprising, artistic modes of production are regarded as the blueprint for what Maurizio Lazzarato terms "immaterial labour." He states that, "the process of the production of communication tends to become immediately the





process of valorization.”³ If the production of communication immediately transforms into the process of valorization, it is hard to see how any work of art could be capable of somehow remaining outside economical valorization and thus marketability. If communication itself has not only a symbolic but also immediate exchange value, the critical stance of avant-garde artists, who were aiming at strategies of immaterialisation and ephemeral events in contrast to economic valorization, has indeed entirely forfeited its critical logic. Although, by definition it remains a singular practice, the work of the German artist Tino Segahl is relevant in this context because it is almost entirely centered on communication; the communication of chosen actors between each other as well as the communication among the witnesses of his pieces and the stories they have to tell about them. He manages to generate exchange value without leaving any trace; no score, no recording and not even a contract of his performed works. Still, his work functions very well within the confines of the traditional art establishment. A very different example for an artistic strategy, that is deeply embedded within contemporary communication culture, is the fascinating rise of the so called street-artist Banksy.⁴ The public availability of his work in the urban realm led to an immense hype, which was fueled by a multiplication via individual photography and communication technologies. In his case the brand that was built through repetition, availability, sharing and abundance rather than scarcity has directly led to increasing market valorization of a practice that formerly had the air of gratuitous semi-legal activism. What is interesting in this case is not the fact that the “underground towards sellout” pattern has worked once more, but the impact of individuals uploading their photos of Banksy graffiti on Flickr and sharing it with a growing community of fans and other producers. Here, communication equals valorization. Yet, to be fair, the products that are sold once again follow the classic logic of material scarcity, and could be regarded as an updated version of Andy Warhol’s approach to selling art. However, what this example demonstrates is how symbolic value grows not through scarcity, but precisely the opposite. The focus on symbolic value that is a prerequisite of artistic intervention makes it possible to portray the forces of monetary exchange in a different way. As Sadie Plant puts it, “the insistence that everything—objects, experiences, and people alike—has a value, whether it is that





imputed by exchange or use, is central to both political economy and its critique; neither can tolerate its transgression. But symbolic values count for nothing; they generate no wealth and indicate no use, and it is precisely in this symbolic realm that the possibilities of a subversive ridicule of political economy emerge."⁵

Now, one might want to ask why the early works of media artists embracing the Internet, which were often entirely based on the possibilities of communication itself, have not immediately turned out to be the most expensive works of art in the market. To give an example, the New York based "The Thing," a bulletin board initiated in 1995 by Wolfgang Staehle among others, which enabled communication among artists, was declared a work of art in its entirety and auctioned off a few years ago, for a marginal prize, as an ironical gesture.⁶ The true irony here is that at the core of the communication in all of the cases that managed to transform symbolic value into exchange value lies a narrative of scarcity. The Thing, by its very nature, was never intended to do that. In Tino Sehgal's case the narrative is about scarcity through presence and the lack of recordings, while Banksy's work can only be seen in specific locations as long as the graffiti has not been removed (which surely enough doesn't happen as fast as it used to).⁷ To be more precise, the exchange value enhancing scarcity that used to be inscribed in material presence has literally moved into the realm of the symbolic. In a slightly different form, this process takes place on an immense scale in so-called information economies, and can be studied in detail in the discourses surrounding copyrights. Musicians especially have had to adapt to the paradigm shift that was signaled by the advent of digital file sharing. Here again the symbolic value that transforms itself into exchange value is initially fueled by an act of sharing.

At this point it might be interesting to consider the growing importance of all forms of economical exchange based on the notion of the gift. Theoretical encounters with the notion of the gift, which was introduced by Marcel Mauss and taken up by Georges Bataille, and subsequently in Jean Baudrillard's conception of a solar economy, have led a seemingly marginal existence in recent discourse of economics. Yet, especially if one considers the impact of the internet, these concepts





are worthy of renewed consideration. Marcel Mauss' famous study of the gift has shown that gift based economies turn the relationship between exchange and symbolic value on its head.⁸ A radical adherence to the form of gift transactions establishes symbolic value first, while exchange value follows suit. This is accompanied by the fact that a specific relationship is established between the one who gives and the one who receives. Most importantly, one should not forget that forms of gift exchange also establish specific sets of power relations and dependencies and that the success of monetary exchange is based on the power to neutralize these relationships and thus provide the kind of individual freedom that has transformed societies globally. With the gift, reciprocity becomes the foreground, and the social sustainability of exchanges is strengthened. Clearly, the culture of giving is highly complex and culturally diverse. For example, other than in most Western cultures, in China the giver habitually puts the price tag of the gift inside the box to clarify the exchange value that has been invested. Still, it seems that economical transactions based on the gift represent forms of exchange that, while in the long run cannot bypass the market, generate a clearer perspective towards the different forms of value creation and exchange that define our productive networks. The work of Sal Randolph is relevant in this context because she focuses very precisely on the quality of the gift in relation to monetary or exchange value. Her free money project is an ongoing work where she gives people the choice to either keep \$20 for themselves, or to receive \$100 to give away to somebody else.⁹ In a slightly different rendition of the free money project she creates a kind of treasure hunt by stashing golden envelopes, which contain different sums of money, with the Chinese symbol for good fortune on them in the city. As an artist, she collects the stories and experiences that result from this kind of intervention. The simple act of giving away money for free merges the different systems of value and exchange, and allows people to reflect on the act of giving as well as the symbolic value of the act in relation to the exchange value that the money embodies. It remains to be seen whether the notion of the gift still holds the subversive potential for contemporary artists that Situationists like Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem could bestow upon it. After all, as the saying goes, gifts are truly priceless.





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