CASHING IN ON THE DISCOURSE OF LIBERTATION: HOW THE
COMMODIFICATION OF ART DEBASES EXPRESSIONS OF
RESISTANCE

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Debases Expressions of Resistance

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to those who have facilitated my journey in learning. Some were teachers, some were friends and some were both. Each inspired me to continue learning, not simply as a means of acquiring an occupation but instead to better understand the world we live in. I am grateful to those who guided me along my path thus far; those who have helped me become conscious to the powerful social forces that shape the world as well as the agency I wield.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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When we think of a work of art, there are a multitude of images that may come to mind, all of which are valid. Contemporary art can consist of almost anything but this has not always been the case. Particular interests have shaped Art, like other social institutions. Contemporary art is not exempt from manipulation by powerful individuals and institutions. An examination of instances and works throughout the history of art provides insight into just how malleable art is. An inspection of art’s function in these instances of art history paints a picture of ideological changes that are manifested in changes in art forms and trends. As such, there are several moments in the development of art that speak to art’s power to alter reality by aligning art with a particular ideology. Artists, dealers and collectors play an integral role in fostering or negating change in the meaning of art to the extent that their agency affects our perception of art. Though appearing free from the historical standards of “traditional art forms”, contemporary art proves to be bound by particular interests of powerful individuals as well as the institutions in which it exists. Finally, I suggest that art proves an invaluable resource as a space of discourse, specifically in addressing social problems.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The *Venus of Willendorf* is a small figure carved from stone, stands 4 ½ inches high, and was discovered on the banks of the Danube River in Austria (Tomášcová 2003). The Venus dates back about twenty-five thousand years and is often cited in art texts as potentially the first attempt to create a piece of art in the modern day sense of the word. As described by Anthropologist Silvia Tomášcová (2003) this small figure depicts a female body with no discernible face and arms but with amplified breasts and hips. Surrounding the figure is a long running debate between what purposes its creator had in mind for the use of the figure at the time when it was *Venus* was created.

The question at hand for those involved in the debate on the intended purpose of the Venus is that of form verses function, whether the figure was created simply for aesthetics or to serve a designated purpose. Whether the *Venus* is recognizable as a work of art to a group due to established shared meanings, or if it could serves a function for the group, largely has to do with the groups cultural perspective. When viewing images of the *Venus* from a Western perspective, the trend is often to argue that the figure cannot possibly be an expression of the beauty of the female form due to the ample proportions of the figure’s body, which by Western cultural standards does not represent a desirable female body image. The argument revolving around the role of the *Venus* is by default of not being “sexy” enough to serve as erotic or aesthetic art, hence the figure must be a symbol of female fertility due to the enlarged breast and hip regions of the carving.

With concern to established standards of art, the question of whether art is created to serve a function or simply as an aesthetic expression that many individuals find appealing is one of the questions that I seek to address in this thesis. Studying both art and sociology led me to question the direction which my own art takes and where my works fit into the timeline of art history. European art from about the fourteenth century up until the early eighteenth century was limited to the wealthy elites who possessed the means to commission works. Art produced for Europe’s wealthy elite was not an expression of the artist per se,
rather it served a function for the patron, such as stating their status or for increased status in the church securing them a lofty status. Only recently in arts history has the artist been able to create works on a theme or topic of his own choosing and then set out to find an individual who is willing to purchase the work (Gompertz 2012).

In the past art was an expression of the power and culture of an elite few. It was only a matter of time until painters began to create works of art that were expressive of the artist’s rejection of all that elitist art represented. However, there exists an inherent problem in the contemporary art world\(^1\) where once an artist’s work becomes desirable, it will inevitably have a monetary price placed on it due to the demand of individuals who will pay the highest price. The process of artists rejecting art currents brings about new trends, which produce avant-garde art that soon becomes commercialized as the new wave in art. During the process of rejecting established art standards, new art becomes commodified and can fall victim to becoming the new “high” art due to the escalating price tag. This process can lead emergent avant-garde’s voice to be muted under the process of appropriation.

Throughout history there are many artists who have been conscientious of art becoming over commercialized and falling victim to the art world’s standards of “good” or “bad” aesthetics and produce art that speaks to this. Through the examination of the practices of the art market I will discuss the various interests that are at play in promoting art that either rejects or conforms to market values. Among the most widely known and canonized of artists’ whose career has been shaped around the idea of rejecting the commercializing of art is Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp’s piece *Fountain* appears at first sight as nothing more than a mass produced urinal, which the artist signed R.Mutt (Gompertz 2012). Many of Duchamp’s works including *Fountain* were a clear attempt on the artist’s part to reject the standards of a “true” aesthetic. Through Duchamp’s creation of works like *Fountain*, he was able help reshape the current understanding of art and art markets. Duchamp was able to influence the art world through his works rather than have his works filtered through the confines of what the art world deemed “true” art.

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\(^1\) When using the term the art world, I am referring to galleries, critics, museums, and art historians who can potentially play a large role in how history will remember an artist’s work and role that the art played.
While Duchamp has chosen to create art that rejects much of what the art world holds in high esteem, others have embraced the standards of art put forth by the commercialization of art debasing art’s potential. One such artist is Jeff Koons who produces work that has been manufactured by a team of hired artists, similar to Andy Warhol’s Factory that mass-produced prints. Although the works of both Koons and Duchamp have been canonized, there is a clear distinction that separates these two artists: the message and function of the works that they put out as art. Duchamp used a ready-made object to make a statement about what art truly consists of whereas Koons’ art does not carry Duchamp’s subversive message while using Duchamp’s revolutionary concept that anything can be art.

Koons’ art speaks to art history but does not promote the message embodied in the practice of producing the type of art that he creates, which is art that looks less like art and more like everyday objects. An example of this is New Hover, Deluxe Shampoo Polisher, which consists of a Plexiglas encased shampoo polisher with florescent lights mounted on the floor of the case (Thompson 2008). While Duchamp’s Fountain seems to be making the same statement as the art produced by Koons, this is not the case. Duchamp’s art carries more weight because it speaks to our lived conditions, hegemony, and alienation due to the critical nature of his works, which prompts the viewer to reflect on what they are looking at and why it is art. Although Koon’s art may also prompt viewers to decipher the meaning, the depth of the read is shallow due to its reliance on prefabricated texts that speaks to market values more than to our lived conditions.

Following in the fashion of Duchamp who used his art to express his message of disapproval with the dominant ideals of the art world and its institutions, artists are well aware of the power that their art can possess through the messages conveyed via the work they produce. In fact, some even have been able to channel their voices through the medium of art in ways that have brought attention to social justice issues in a manner that would not have normally been accessible through other means due to their marginalized status. For example, Judy Chicago structured her body of work around the fact that women’s voices and experiences were not being represented as she states, “my investigation of women’s art has led me to conclude that what prevents women from being great artists is the fact that we have been unable so far to transform our circumstances into our subject matter” (Collins 2006).
A similar sentiment was shared within the African American art community in Harlem after the assassination of black civil rights leader Malcolm X (Collins 2006). Artists such as Jeff Donaldson dedicated themselves to producing art that engaged in consciousness raising, in an effort to de-marginalize the group’s history, culture, rituals and myths that had been labeled as the other in contrasts to whites “normalcy” (Collins 2006). While the 1960s were synonymous with social movements aimed at increasing the rights of women and minorities, this hasn’t been the case recently. The election of the first black president and changing cultural views, has lead to many individuals being under the misconception that racial, and to a large extent sexual, discrimination have become a thing of the past regardless of the fact that women and people of color are still underrepresented in major social institutions, including the art world.

Although much progress has been made in acquiring rights for individuals who have in the past had restrictions placed on them, I will argue that there is a great vacuum in a the art world where social justice is the focal point in favor for art that is expressive of market values. An excellent example of a contemporary artist who embraces the task of producing social justice art is Ai Weiwei. Weiwei lives and works in China under a repressive government but has chosen to dedicate his life’s work to raising awareness of social issues and has been very successful as an artist activist. In part because of his success, Weiwei has faced severe censorship from his government to the extent that he has filed a lawsuit against the Chinese government claiming that they are guilty of legal violations in having imposed a two million dollar tax evasion charge on him, viewed by many as a form of deterrence to his political views. Weiwei is no stranger to restrictions imposed by his government after witnessing his father, also an artists, deal with censorship and sanctions placed upon him for producing art that addresses social justice issues faced by the citizens of China.

Just like Weiwei, many artists have been drawn into the social justice realm through a shared experience of marginalization and a heightened awareness that the narrative of much of the art that is canonized has ignored their viewpoint, plight, and often, their existence. By applying the sociological theories of Karl Marx, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Pierre Bourdieu among others, I will address the alienation, hegemony and art world practices to bring to light why segments of society feel that much of the art that is canonized is not representative of their lived experiences. I will also elucidate how the interactions
between artists, the art world, culture and the market interplay to reform and shape each other as well as produce revolutionary artists.
CHAPTER 2

CULTURAL DENIGRATION THROUGH ART

Museums, galleries, universities, and critics, all serve various functions within the art world\(^2\), yet they all share in the role of gatekeeper who has the power to decide what is considered art, who is an artist, and establish the parameters in which a monetary value will be ascribed to works of art. Gatekeepers shape the art world and mold artists into individuals who will promote the values and practices that have been established by the gatekeepers. Artist also hold the power to shape the gatekeepers by working around, confronting, and rejecting the standards that gatekeepers have produced in the art world. However, it is more commonly the case that gatekeepers are the ones doing the shaping of artists as well as defining the standards of works since they play a large part in the “making or breaking” of works that an artist will produce and depend on for their livelihood.

An artists’ trade serves the function of an occupation through which they are able to provide for themselves financially, but the works produced by them also serves the function of representing culture. The question of whose culture is being represented is what I intend to address in this chapter. In 1937 the Nazi run German government, acting as gatekeeper of the gallery and realizing the powerful role art has in shaping culture, sought to exploit that power by putting on two art shows. One was entitled Degenerate Art and the other was the 1\(^{st}\) annual exhibition of Great German Art, which was to be held at the newly consecrated House of German Art. The idea for the degenerate art show came from the Ministry for Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment, a branch of the Nazi party headed by Joseph Goebbels and the goal of the exhibit was to disseminate the Nazi party ideal of German culture (Levi 1998).

Attendance at the degenerate art show was reported to have been over two million, arguably making it the most successful art show in the history of organized shows. Within the show, Goebbels emphasized the need to distinguish between what he called “the art of

\(^2\) In referencing the art world I refer to the sphere made up of networks of cultural production, distribution, and consumption.
those days and the art of our days” (Levi 1998:43). Goebbels words speak to an attempt on behalf of the Nazi government to shed the previously held ideas of what German culture was and to insert in its place a new definition of culture through the framing of certain types of art as degenerate. The degenerate art show was to be juxtaposition to the Great German art show. The effort of the Nazis was not only to show the viewing public what constitutes “good” art, but also to crystallize the distinction by comparing it with “bad” art.

The Nazi party directed the German public towards a particular read of the works of art in a way that was favorable to the expansion of an ideology that falls in line with goals of the Nazi regime. Further proof of cultural hijacking was the fact that art criticism was prohibited in 1936 and was replaced with an art description on the basis of “popular emancipation from excessively foreign, Jewish influences” (Levi 1998:48). The Nazis first eliminated the context provided by art critics and then manufactured a space for re-contextualization within the degenerate art show. In a similar vein to the degenerate art show, the Salon des Refuse in 17th century France was an exhibition space set aside for paintings that were rejected by the agents of the ruling classes gate keepers.

In seventeenth century France, the state sponsored art academies were able to define what qualified as art, and rewarded those deemed worthy by being displayed at the Salon, which beginning in 1725 was the official art exhibition of the Academie des Beaux Arts (Grenfell and Hardy 2007). The Academie des Beaux Arts set the standard of painting in what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the “academic standard” (Inglis 2005). The Academie defined the greatness of art, which was epitomized by the works of masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci. The process of learning to paint by reproducing works of past master painters leaves nothing new to be introduced into the field of art, there was to be no avant-garde. Change in style or practice would not be welcomed as innovation but as degenerative to the already perfected and established standards of practice. Bourdieu (2009:110) states it best in that “the idea was less to say something than to show how well it had been said”.

To allow artists to deviate from the works of masters who had been canonized would be equivalent of having the cultural standards of the ruling class turned upside down. In order to perpetuate high culture, it was necessary for the art world to exist exclusively within the institutions of the ruling class, such as art academies. Seventeenth century London was a mirror image of France’s practices of elitism to the extent that successful artists were
knighted to reflect their honorary high-class status. Impressionist painter Édouard Manet submitted his now famous painting *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* to the judges of the Salon show and the work was rejected based on its style and content.

Manet was part of a new movement that broke tradition from the academic standard of “finely blended colors, classical allusions, an exquisitely drawn line, idealized representation of the human form and aspirational subjects. (Gompertz 2012:24). Impressionists were the first anarchists in the art world, breaking free from the confines of the studio to paint *en plein air*, in the open air. The new subject of everyday scenes and people required a new technical approach that included speed to capture the impression of what is seen. The canonized draftsmanship of old masters did not lend itself well to goals of impressionists painters. Impressionists viewed the canons of the Academie as outdated and stifling and broke with almost every tradition that the elitism of the art world had venerated.

Manet’s paintings were among thousands of others that had been rejected by the Academie, including works by now famous Paul Cézanne, James McNiell Whistler, and Camille Pissarro (Gompertz 2012). However, Manet did not give up his efforts to have his work shown at the Salon and they paid off in two groundbreaking ways. First his painting *Olympia* was accepted by the Salon judges to outcries of disapproval. *Olympia* depicts a nude woman who is clearly a prostitute and the painting is full of references that were deemed immoral due to their sexual allusions. The tension that existed between artists and the Academie was mirrored in the streets with the disapproval of the reign of Napoleon III.

In an effort to quell the unrest of the masses and a possible rebellion, Napoleon III decreed that paintings rejected by the Salon judges were to have their own space in the Salon des Refuses (Gompertz 2012). The Salon des Refuses, meaning the Salon of the rejected carried with it the same negative connotations as the Degenerate Art exhibition but without the large turnout from the public, who were not impressed with the works in the Refuses show. However, for the first time, the dominance of the Academie was questioned in a public official manner by a state sanctioned platform. For the artist community this meant the beginning of a new era where diversion from the canons of the art world had a space to exist, experiment, and explore of their own free will. There was now an alternative art.

The existence of another version of art did not mean the end of the Academies or their dominance. However, it was a ground shattering first step in the conflict between high art
and art that would instigate and negate the claims made by the dominant trends in art and aesthetics. The path of opposing the dominant judgment of the art world would not be an easy road to travel, but at least a viable option was now available to artists who chose not to fall in line with the restrictions of the Academies. Today, artists must still choose between conforming to the standards of the art world or they face an uphill battle to gain access to the legitimizing institutions that they depend on to imbue their works with monetary value allowing them to make a living.

Having to work in conditions not of their choosing, artists are like all other workers, except that unlike other workers, artists come to regard their freedom as essential to the creative process (Baines 1987). Since the Renaissance, the concept of the artists as unique has been seen as integral to the type of work that artists do. It’s not just the combination of form and color produced by an artist’s rendering that is important, but how the particular view and style of the artist then manifests the depiction that makes the work of an artist uniquely theirs. The value judgments made by the Academies of the past are not concerned with art guidelines such as composition, form and color, they are concerned with maintaining and perpetuating the value system of elite members.

**AGENCY IN THE ART WORLD**

The philosopher Karl Marx writes, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (Marx and Engels 1972:172). The validity of Marx’s claim is apparent in the art world due to the fact that artists have historically followed the flow of power held by the ruling class. When society was ordered along the lines of a theocracy, artists found their work with the church, and the content of art was directly related to religious themes. What was “good” art then consisted of works with contents and themes that were sanctioned by the church. Wealthy patrons would not commission works for their homes, but rather the commissioned work would stay in the church and through the perceived power of the priest, were granted preference in the eyes of god.

Among royalty was another area where power resided and where one could also find prominent artists. The Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza best known as the man who commissioned *The Last Supper*, employed Leonardo da Vinci and was known for employing
artists of all kinds to produce works for him (Baines 1987). In this instance the Duke was using the status imbued in the artist, by the art world of the day, to reinforce his own position of power and elite status. The artist served as an instrument for the Duke’s own means, at the same time reinforcing the legitimacy of the art world and the culture it promotes. And for da Vinci it validated his craft. However, the role of the artist in the exchange between artist and Duke is a means to an end, that end being the Duke’s elevated status as a “cultured” individual who is knowledgeable of the art world and the values that are associated with it.

The role of the artist can become complicated once they become conscious of the relationship that exists between themselves and their patrons. Da Vinci marketed himself as a builder of war machines first and an artist second, working for the Duke of Milan, clearly recognizing that he needed to make an income by any means available to him (Baines 1987). The image of the starving artist can lead to the belief that the artist is primarily concerned with making art and not with making a living any way that they can. However, there is a fine line to be walked by the artist because even an artist needs to make and an income. In their efforts to provide themselves a living wage the artist can often come to a fork in the road where they ask themselves, how much, if any, artistic freedom are they willing to sacrifice to make a living?

Artists are not the only individuals in the art world that must deal with the issue of if, when, and how they are willing to “sell out” for the sake of financial success. Gallery owners, art critics, and art historians also must decide if they are going to fall in line with the dominant ideology of the art world in their time and place, or go against the grain and risk losing financially. Participants in the art world that decide to fall in line with the guidelines and practices of the art world may not agree with the art worlds ideology or practice, but chose to function within it for financial security. Karl Marx recognized that individuals are tied to a particular ideology because their financial well-being depends on it, and states that these individuals are responsible for “it’s active, conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood” (1972:173). Gallery owners, critics, and art historians have their livelihoods tied to a particular set of ideas of what constitutes good art. For these individuals to reject the canons of the art world could prove detrimental to their ability to make a living and the status that they enjoy within the art world.
Marcia Bystryn (1978) provides an excellent example of two very different paths that gallery owners can take to become either a cultural or an economic institution. Bystryn argues that art galleries can take on one of two distinct forms. Type one is concerned with innovation and “bringing promising artists into the art market and promoting them successfully” (Bystryn 1978:392). Type two is primarily concerned with invention and the goal of this type of gallery is to “foster invention in the artistic community by being more involved with the individual artist and bringing to fruition his creative potential” (Bystryn 1978:392). The important distinction between the two types of galleries lies in their commitment, either to the artist or to the financial well-being of the institution.

Bystryn provides as an example of the two types of galleries by referring to Betty Parsons and Sam Kootz. Parsons was trained in studio art and was a producer of art, whereas Kootz wrote as an art historian whose training was indoctrinated with the ideology of the art world, of canonization, and of the merits of “good” art. In 1946 Parsons opened her own gallery after working in various galleries for almost a decade and finding it difficult to find work as an artist. Parsons was helped and supported in opening her gallery by the artists Barnett Newman, who was instrumental in introducing her to many up and coming artists, including Jackson Pollock (Bystryn 1978). At one point Parsons had in her stable of artists four well know abstract expressionists which she referred to as “The Four Men of the Apocalypse”, and one by one they all left Parsons in pursuit of a more lucrative career (Bystryn 1978). Parsons’ four men of the apocalypse propositioned her to drop all her other artists and focus solely on them telling her that “they would make me the most famous dealer in the world”, which Parsons refused (Bystryn 1978:400).

Sam Kootz on the other hand had an excellent knowledge of art history, which he used in combination with his previous advertising business experience to successfully market his artist (Bystryn 1978). Kootz’s knowledge of art history allowed him to define a style or movement and to locate it within the timeline of history, thereby adding legitimacy to the works produced by artists in his stable. In his efforts to market his artists, Kootz used critics and well know literary men to write catalogue introductions for his artists. For example, Tennesse Williams wrote of the works of Hans Hofmann, Jean Paul Sarte wrote of David Hare, and Clement Greenburg wrote of Fernand Léger (Bystryn 1978). Kootz used the credibility of these critics and scholars to add legitimacy to the works produced by his artists,
which was financially beneficial to him. Another method of innovation in marketing used by Kootz was to put on a show entitled “Intra-Subjectives” where he defined the leaders of the Abstract Expressionist movement, as well as putting on shows such as “Talent 1950” where he displayed artists that were favored by critics (Bystryn 1978). Kootz’s innovation did not stop there; he was even able to convince patrons to invest in him in spite of being hesitant about the large size of the works that were being produced by his artists. Kootz told investors “it was because the painter was using his whole arm and body, and that the canvases give more freedom for the stroke” (Bystryn 1978:404).

Because of the large pool of individuals who want to be artists, galleries of the type run by Parsons’ serve the crucial function of giving artists their first exposure to the art world thereby serving as a filtering process for galleries of the type run by Kootz. Taking on unknown artists can be financially risky and because a gallery like Kootz’s is primarily an economic institution, the gallery would not take any chances in showing artists who would not secure a return for the gallery. Both Kootz and Parsons were conscious of the decisions that they made. Kootz was not concerned with pushing the envelope of the avant-garde as much as he was concerned with making a profit.

Parsons on the other hand recognized that she was in a unique situation that allowed her to foster the vision of her artists, even if that meant doing so at the cost of her own success as a gallery owner. Parsons was so dedicated to the production of art that former chief curator at MOMA, Dorothy Miller was quoted as saying “Betty Parsons lost interest in an artist the moment that he began selling at high prices” (Bystryn 1978:398). The examples of Kootz and Parsons cannot be generalized, but they serve as an excellent case study of the possible trajectories that a gallery can take based on the ideology that the gallery owner brings to the venture of promoting art, either for cultural or economic reasons. Clearly Parsons was more concerned with pushing art to its next step in the progression of art history, while Kootz was more than willing to use art as a means of making money.

**Agency of the Artist**

According to Marx, the relationship that exists between the worker and the owners of the means of production is detrimental to the worker’s well-being and leaves the workers feeling alienated. Even though most people do not consider the work of an artist to be on par
with the work done in most other fields of employment, the artist is not immune to the feeling of alienation. Artists who are represented by galleries often feel pressure to produce and or face being let go. However, artists have other options when it comes to being represented by a gallery, and some artists have been able to collaborate and open their own artists run galleries.

Artists in San Francisco and Santa Cruz have created their own alternatives to the established galleries that function within the art world. According to Sharon Batia (1979) there are several groups of artists who own galleries, run them, manage their own exposure as artists, and make an effort to re-establish direct contact with their audiences and communities. In these spaces the gallery owners are free to show works, even works that are purely experimental and are truly art for arts sake (Batia 1979). The artist-run spaces range in type and function and some do not fulfill the same function as galleries or museums, but rather are focused on showing art to the community.

Batia identifies six different types of galleries with varied goals and forms of operation. Gallery type one consists of individual artists who own and manage galleries where their work, and occasionally the work of others, is shown (Batia 1979). Gallery type two is an “open studio” where on designated weekends, artist’s studios are open to the public and weekend events are collectively organized and publicized by the artists involved (Batia 1979). Gallery type three consists of artist rented spaces in libraries, banks, or lobbies of different buildings for the purpose of holding an exhibition (Batia 1979). However, this type of space cannot serve the same function as a gallery or museum but it is still a place where artists can have total control over their own exposure.

Gallery type four is a co-operative gallery that is co-owned or co-rented and collectively run by artists who exhibit and sell their own work there (Batia 1979). Gallery type five is an “alternative” gallery that is collectively or individually run and exhibit art which, cannot be shown in regular galleries due to the works special requirements, such as installation work (Batia 1979). Batia (1979) refers to the sixth type of gallery as community-oriented centers that are multipurpose organizations where exposing the community to various forms of art is an integral part of the centers function, and art related activities are run by artists from the community (Batia 1979).
Similar to gallery type three, gallery type six does not share the same goals and function as galleries and museums that are dominant in the art world. The goals of galleries type three and six are primarily concerned with exposure of art to the community, and not with the end goal of selling art. Artists are much more likely to diverge from the art world than other agents that are operating within it because they are not in it purely for financial gain. Batia writes of the alternate galleries, “these emerge in response to particular constraints of the present gallery/museum system” (Batia 1979:6). The constraints that artists face range from alienation to a lack of creative fostering on the part of gallery owners who do not financially gain from having their artists explore new things. Gallery owners want artists to produced what is tried and true in the art market, and artists exploring different things could prove detrimental to profits.

Artists run galleries also serve several unique functions for artists and communities that galleries do not. Within alternative galleries, artists other than owners or co-owners have the opportunity to show their art while paying less than commercial galleries for the service of promoting and organizing (Batia 1979). In alternative space type galleries (type five), a small group of artists constitute the board of directors and show works by other artists who are not members of the gallery. It is not a financial burden for alternative space galleries to show other artist because they have a non-profits status allowing them to receive grants for funding (Batia 1979). Artists run galleries give artists a way to experience less of the inherent commercialization process that comes along with galleries and museums. An artist interviewed by Batia sums up the opinion of many arts in stating that commercial galleries exist to “rob, exploit, cheat and manipulate artist for their own economic interests” (Batia 1979:9).

However, the most important benefit for artists who are active in artists-run galleries is a fostering of their creative energies, which most artists would agree, is priceless. In the galleries where artists share expenses they also share tools and often share new techniques as well, all of which facilitates the process of artistic experimentation and growth (Batia 1979). There are some limitations to all of the forms of artists-run galleries but they are a step in the direction of increased freedom for the artist. Most of the artists who participate in a form of artist-run gallery stated that this is not their final destination and they do aspire to be known and make money from their art, but they want to do it on their terms.
Artists who decide to take the traditional route of selling their works through a gallery also have ways of avoiding the over commercialized aspect of the art world. Some artists have made efforts to go against the lure of powerful commercial galleries, such as the one owned by Kootz, by staying loyal to the art dealers that have nourished their early careers. Artists have also tried to avoid auction houses by including a right to first refusal in their selling agreements, allowing dealers to have the first crack at new works before they go to auctions houses (Velthuis 2013). And lastly, dealers have produced and circulate blacklists of collectors who have a history of re-selling works quickly at auctions, such as the super collector Charles Saatchi (Velthuis 2013).
CHAPTER 3

WILL THE REAL MASSES PLEASE STAND UP:
NEGOTIATING CULTURE IN STREET AND POP
ART

Good business is the best art
--Andy Warhol

The art market is a precarious institution, where art is what an artist proclaims to be art and because the price of a work of art is what someone is willing to pay of it. As illustrated in chapter 2, the art market has historically been dominated by the wealthy elite of society and very little has changed today. Though a larger segment of society consumes art by visiting museums and having a general knowledge of canonical works of art, there are still a very small numbers of individuals who can call themselves art collectors and within the last two decades the art market has seen a drastic change in prices and practices.

Art collectors of today may purchase art for the love of art and also for the love of money. The art market peaked in the years between 1990 and 2008 with the top segment of the contemporary art market seeing a rise in prices of six fold (Velthuis 2007). The growth of the art market has far outgrown the rate of expansion in the overall world market. In the time between 2003 and 2007 the market for contemporary art grew by 851 percent, almost three times the growth of the overall market (Velthuis 2007). And the period of 1970 through 1990 experienced a growth in the number of artists by a rate of 127 percent, a rate of growth much higher than the civilian labor force (Menger 1999).

My intent is not to argue that every individual that strives to be an artist is able to do so due to the vast growth of the art market. There is a massive pool of artists who are underemployed, unemployed, or have more than one job and who list themselves as artists in census and survey data while not earnings the majority of their livelihood in the artistic labor field (Menger 1999). Adding to the confusion of attaining a somewhat accurate idea of the growth of the art market are those employed in the audiovisual, broadcasting sector, advertising, media, and computer game industry (Menger 1999). The growth experienced in
the art market is not reflective of an increase in occupation of artist types that are the topic of discussion for this work, such as painters, sculptors, photographers, and so on.

Growth in the art market can be translated as an increased demand for contemporary works of art, in part due to the art of old masters being fixed in quantity. Due to the potentially large returns on investments in the art market even hedge fund managers have turned to art as an alternative to more conventional forms of investment. Billionaire hedge fund manager Daniel Loeb made Art News’s annual list of *Two Hundred Top Art Collectors* and hedge fund manager Stephen A. Cohen is listed in both Forbes *Top Billionaire Art Collectors List* as well as Art News’s *Top 10* art collectors list around the world (Velthuis 2007). The art market has reached unprecedented levels of economic prosperity and the resulting increase in the commodification of art has affected all those involved in the art world as well as re-shaped the art market.

Karl Marx’s theory of historical materialism is often mistaken as a form of economic determinism. However, letters written by Marx’s collaborator Fredric Engles provide a clear definition of the intent behind the idea of historical materialism. Engles writes “the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of material life… if somebody twists this this into saying that the economics is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase” (Hemmingway 2006:3). The claim that Marx and Engels are making is that a nation’s economic system serves as the bedrock from which that nation’s social institutions will spring forth and take shape. Art must function within the constraints created by capitalism, which produces a particular form of political system, and the political system subsequently produces our social structure where the formation of culture takes place.

Art is difficult to commodify because it is not easily reducible to elements that can be grouped together and translated into a quantifiable amount of currency. However, because capitalism dictates that everything must be made into a commodity, the art world has produced institutions that must attempt to evaluate the price of art works resulting in a general formula for ascertaining the monetary value of pieces of art. The pricing of works of art takes place first in a primary market where the artist produces a work then sells it (Westgarth 2009). Then there is a secondary market where a work is re-sold such as between private collectors and auction houses (Westgarth 2009). Because the art of today is not
commissioned by an individual patron, innovations in the art market have been made to allow for prospective buyer to gain knowledge of prices for works of art, including art-price indices as well as websites such as artnet.com that distribute art auction prices worldwide (Velthuis 2013).

New tools for art pricing have emerged as a means for allowing patrons and collectors to map out the value of a work based on the criteria of the art market. This was not necessary in the past because the patron who commissioned a work from an artist would most likely interact with the artist. Because the patron would have more direct exposure to an artist they were given the opportunity to gain insight into the prominence of the artist’s work, the popularity of the style in which the artist works were produced, and who else was commissioning works from the artists (Westgarth 2009). The patron of a work of art could see firsthand what others are willing to pay for the work and whether or not the work was in demand.

Secondary markets in the form of auction houses first became well known in London with the famous auction rooms of James Christie in 1766 (Westgarth 2009). In the art world of today auction houses sell some of the most highly priced works of art in a setting where often the buyer is not even present in the room and there is no interaction between artists and buyers. Art price indices, websites, and auction house catalogues, allow collectors to inquire into the monetary value of works of art since they are so detached from the actual point of production. The art world’s production of art-prices indices, catalogues, websites, and other pricing materials follow a formula that is reflective of the dominant ideology and hegemony that shapes the art world.

Among the criteria that are used to place a monetary value on art is the popularity of subject’s work style, which changes in time parallel to trends in design that affect desirability (Westgarth 2009). However, trends do not just come about organically, they are promoted by those individuals who benefit in some way from the canonizing of certain types or elements of design as well as through influences of the market. Universities influence students through professors that are already established and have been influenced themselves through galleries that represent them and promote their work in the art market. This is not to say that art professors blindly perpetuate ideas and taste of the ruling class, but they are influenced by currents in the art market because what is art is what is being sold as art. In this way the
criteria of popularity of subjects work style is one of taste, and taste is neither objective nor universal, but reflective of a particular set of values. As the title of the French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s influential book *Distinction* alludes to, taste and values serve to differentiate and rank individuals and groups from one another (Bourdieu 2009).

The second factor that goes into pricing a work of art is the artist’s reputation (Westgarth 2009). The stature of the artist within the art world is one of the most important factors that go into the pricing of their works. An aspect of the artists’ standing that is considered in pricing their work is the prominence of the artist, which includes exhibition history, group or solo showings, past and planned for the future, and how the exhibitions are received in popular and scholarly media (Westgarth 2009). Another aspect taken into account is the artist’s reputation, which is gauged by their appearance in publications, text books, inclusion in standard surveys, encyclopedias of art, art journals and magazines (Westgarth 2009).

However, as stated earlier taste and aesthetics are expressive of embracing or negating a particular set of values. The values that the art world holds in high esteem are ascertainable through what it promotes and values highly in monetary value and rewards. Efforts can be made by individuals in the art world to make sure that a particular set of values is guaranteed longevity by elevating a work to the level of canonization. A work that is canonized in the sphere of education through inclusion in textbooks can enjoy prosperity and a continued position in our cultural landscape, such as the artists of the renaissance and the tales of *Romeo & Juliet* or *The Great Gatsby*.

The last element of an artist’s reputation is the inclusion in major public or private collections, which is the aspect that least takes into consideration the actual labor done by the artist and relies purely on the market. The inclusion in prominent collections whether public or private, speaks to the value and legitimacy placed on the taste of the individual or institution that has purchased the work (Westgarth 2009). And as mentioned before, taste is not objective, “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier” letting others know the individual’s status, cultural orientation, and financial standing thereby legitimating social difference (Bourdieu 2009). Rarity, condition, and provenance are also taken into account when pricing works of art. Condition and rarity apply mostly to older works of art and are
both in part based on available similar works that have in common the first two conditions of popularity of subjects work style and the artist’s reputation.

Provenance is also a complicated aspect to appraise due to the variety of contexts that can present themselves, which are all unique in their impact and the scale of attention received in and out of the art world. Within a particular artist’s career and style there may be defining works that are in essence a piece of history and not just in the art world, but to the extent that they become cultural artifacts that are known by large segments of society. In order for a work to even be considered a piece of history there are a slew of political implications that must be taken into account. If a work of art is going against the established norms of the art world, it may not be allowed to reach the legitimized stages of galleries and museums to become a part of art history.

Artists who are able to ascend the ranks of the art world with an ideology that is not complimentary to that of the art world, do so in a somewhat controlled manner. Controlled not in the sense that the artist will not be allowed to produce certain works of a particular style or type, but in the sense that the subversive power of the works produced will be reduced, reworked, and consumed so that is does not break down the status hierarchy of the art world and its market. Further elaboration on the hegemony of the art world will be covered in the following sections.

**Art By and For the People**

Art is the expression of a particular point of view that is synonymous with a particular cultural milieu, which most often exists together with a countering perspective or ideology. As was the case in Germany when the culture favored by the Nazi regime became dominant and as a result, art that veered off the established course of those in power was labeled as deviant or lacking a “true” aesthetic. The history of art movements is a history of the tug of war between opposing points of view. Imbedded in any point of view are cultural and moral standards that stem from a particular value system, which acts as a social indicator of distinction.

Impressionists who broke from the norm established by the power elites and the art academies that shared their aesthetic values brought about the first anarchist art movement. Art forms that break from the aesthetic standard championed by the art world constitute a re-
appropriation of the intellectual tradition of producing art that defines culture. French Impressionists, such as Camille Pissarro who painted scenes of everyday life and Claude Monet with his colorful haystack paintings, may not have been trying to overthrow any particular worldview; they did however, recognize the limitations inherent in allowing for only one style of art with a prescribed acceptable range of content. The impressionist’s push for change was prompted by a change in their technique, in wanting to represent things and objects not in their European classically idealized form but in the way that they are experienced it, which included depicting the “lowly” proletariat and scenes of the performance of everyday life (Gompertz 2012).

To be sure when it comes to going against the grain, Dada is the art movement that aimed at overthrowing the very structure of society and unlike the French Impressionists, they would have no objection to being referred to as anarchist. Dada means “Good Bye” in French, “Hobby Horse” in German, and “Yes, Indeed” in Romanian, but no one meaning is definitively accepted as the intended meaning of the word (Gompertz 2012). Perhaps like Dada art, the name Dada is meant to represent something that cannot be confined to one dimension, order or a “right way”. The movement began in 1916 Zurich Switzerland by a group of individuals who were fed up with the current way that our history was unraveling, in a senseless world war, in the alienation of the masses, and in the capitalistic logic that was at the foundation of our social structures (Gompertz 2012). Dada is commonly perceived as the celebration of nothing, of senselessness, which diffuses the intended purpose of the Dadaist movement. After fleeing from Germany Hugo Ball opened up the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich as a space for artists of all kinds and orientations to come together and do Dada. Dadaism was grounded not in nihilism, but in the rejection of systems that had heretofore resulted in much of what Dadaists viewed as problematic in the world, not just the art world.

Art was the primary medium in which the Dadaist chose to work in but within the larger sphere of art there was no particular style or medium that Dadaist were restricted to in order to express affiliation to the movement. Andre Breton sums up best the parameters of Dada by stating “cubism was a school of painting, futurism a political movement: Dada is a state of mind” (Berard 1999). Cubism was concerned with deconstructing form to escape the limitations of a flat plane of vision in art and Futurism was concerned with showing movement, both were exercises in expanding arts expression of context, time and space, but
Dada went beyond that. The state of mind that Breton spoke of was an anti-grand narratives state of mind, where there exists no dominant dialogue or fixed formulas to produce the “right” way of being and thinking. Dada promoted a state of mind that recognized that “the stability that society had been promised by the world’s leaders based on political cooperation, hierarchies, and social order was a mirage: a deception” (Gompertz 2012:226). Dadaist embraced anarchy as an alternative to the frustration produced by reason, logic, rules, and regulations (Gompertz 2012).

The “meaninglessness” of Dada embodied the frame of mind produced by an ideology that rejected the rationale of our social norms that were viewed by Dadaist as senseless from their end. For Dadaist the only way to reject what was called rational was a total rejection of all things said to be rational and logical, including canonized forms of aesthetics. The most prominent example of rejecting the irrational rationality of art and life was Marcel Duchamp’s readymade 1917 *Fountain*, which is a commercially mass produced urinal signed R. Mutt after the name of the urinals manufacturer, Mott Works (Gompertz 2012). Duchamp’s *Fountain* was to set a new precedent in the art world by taking to new heights the idea of what he called “anti-retinal” art (Gompertz 2012).

Breaking with standards of the art world has never come easy, as was the case for Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Duchamp joined the “Society of Independent Artists”, which was a group of intellectuals that were making a stand against the National Academy of Design’s “conservative and stifling attitude to modern art” (Gompertz 2012). The society allowed anyone to join for a five-dollar fee, and enter as many pieces of as they liked in their show for an additional one-dollar fee per entry (Gompertz 2012:6). Duchamp paid his six dollars and entered his newly acquired urinal. Upon presenting his work to the Societies’ board of directors his *Fountain* was rejected, but was later photographed by Duchamp’s friend and photographer Alfred Stieglitz in his own studio. It was through Stieglitz’s photographs that *Fountain* was introduced to the world. The original *Fountain* was lost, but working from Stieglitz’s photos, there now exist fifteen authorized replicas in various collections around the world (Gompertz 2012).

Duchamp was trying to make it painfully clear that art is not only about the visual enjoyment of color, form, content, and so forth, but that art constitutes a text. Individuals are drawn to or dislike a work in large part due to the signifiers that the work offers to the
individual viewer. Because Duchamp’s *Fountain* was void of the obvious, normalized symbols used for deciphering art texts, such as references to art history, style, form, and so on, he caused a disturbance in the art world. The disturbance that Duchamp’s *Fountain* caused was only in small part because it is a urinal embedded with negative connotations. The real problem with the Fountain was that it questioned the foundation upon which art had erected its sacred institution.

Duchamp dared to question the whole basis of the art world by asking what is art, and under which conditions can something be called art, but most importantly who has the power to designate artistic legitimacy to an object, thereby imbuing it with the power of art. Duchamp let the genie out of the bottle with his *Fountain* and ever since then artists have been free to refer to their creations as art without having to convince the viewers that what they are looking at is worthy of being designated a work of art. Today an artist who’s status has been legitimized in the art world can put forward almost anything and successfully call it art. Duchamp needed to use an object that had been only minimally altered and present it as art in an effort to promote a paradigm shift in aesthetic style. The paradigm shift corresponded to a novel way of expressing the values reflected by changed social conditions in the form of being able to express new ideas (Witkin 2005).

Art is not a universal term and exists together with terms that are its opposite, much like culture in general (Inglis 2005). What Duchamp’s *Fountain* did was allow for a dialogue between art and its opposing meanings. Duchamp realized that art and by reference the culture that it stems from and perpetuates, constitutes dialectics, a back and forth between contrasting views. Although not publicly acknowledged, art and hegemonic culture at any given time constitutes a relational back and forth between countering views and ideas, of imposition and resistance or rejection. With the *Fountain* Duchamp was rejecting the idea of what art was by using the art world’s sacred realm of the museum where anything is possible and viewers contemplate what they would otherwise dismiss, such as the idea that a urinal can be art (Gompertz 2012).

**Pop Art: Consuming Culture**

Among the avant-garde forms of art that have emerged, Pop Art and Graffiti Art occupy two opposing cultural stances yet both mark a departure from the style and content of
what is traditionally referred to as high art. Both Pop Art and Graffiti Art are more connected to the interests and aesthetic appeal of a segment of society that is not active in the art world nor possesses the cultural capital to participate in the appreciation of traditional art. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital refers to “valuable knowledge, sensitivities and resources”, akin to social insider information (Rothenberg 2014:75). Bourdieu writes “economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital and that these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital, never entirely reducible to that definition, produce their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal…the fact that economic capital is at their root” (Berard 1999:143). In other words cultural capital is a product of economic capital, therefore those lacking economic capital are also lacking cultural insight, which can be beneficial in social interactions.

Members of society that do not consider themselves art savvy could find in Pop Art and Graffiti Art symbols that are relatable to their lived experiences and the cultural capital that they have available to them. In Pop Art symbols are readily available without any previous knowledge of art or art history, such as Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans. The reading of Pop Art often requires of the viewer only the widely held knowledge of everyday objects and cultural artifacts and the themes addressed are relatable, which on the surface appears to attempt to deconstruct the high/low brow binary, but that is not the case. Also Pop Art does not need to be placed in a timeline of art to appreciate its aesthetic, nor to be able to extract a message being relayed by the artist. Graffiti Art also needs little to no prior knowledge of art and art history to be appreciated. Not only does Graffiti Art not require previous knowledge of the art world it is imbued with something unique to this form of art, which is the aesthetic of vandalism.

The culture that Pop Art and Graffiti Art promote is in direct opposition to what the art world has historically championed as high art, the art that exists in the sphere of intellectuals, elites, and social leaders. It is intellectual leaders who decide what art consist of and who is an artist by establishing the guidelines of taste embedded in socially constructed values (Gramsci 2009). The labeling of an object as art is not done arbitrarily and there is no formula for ascertaining when something has entered the realm of art. When hegemony reigns, art is what powerful individuals decide to label art, and the act of recognizing an object as art is full of political and economic implications, hence the rejection of Duchamp’s
urinal as art. Individuals who participate in recognizing something as art do so because their interests are augmented by the object being defined as such, as was the case with European art academies that impressionists rejected (Inglis 2005). Correspondingly, it is not always the case that individuals who do not value a work of art lack the cultural capital to read the work; they may be actively choosing to reject the values that the work represents.

The art world is hegemonic, and certain ideological orientations are promoted in conducting business within it, and also in the type of art it produces. A possible function of art tapped into by the ruling class is to serve as a point of distinction, to separate those who know from those who don’t know; those who have access to education in order to know from those who don’t, to distinguish “intellectuals” from “lay people”. The consumption of cultural goods such as art is most useful when an individual is seen consuming it. In essence, when we consume art we are stating that we understand the story and ideas behind the art that provide it’s meaning and elevated status while sympathizing with the arts proposed ideology. On the surface, it would appear as though Pop Art attempted to make a spectacle of the idea of art almost in the same vain as impressionists by stating that the everyday objects and iconography of the masses also merits the designation of works of art, but this is not the case.

The idea behind Pop Art was to call attention to the mundane and everyday imagery with the intention of elevating those common, mass-produced, and over-commercialized objects into high art. The idea of commercialization had not been embraced and toyed with by any other movement so directly as by Pop Art. The thesis to the Pop Art was look at all the things that are being sold to us and that have become a part of our everyday practice of culture. As mentioned before culture is the result of dialectic and there exists no pure form, as the binary distinction of low and high culture would lead us to believe. Pop Art appears to be an anti-art art movement just like Impressionism and Dada before it by focusing on our experiences and cultural artifacts. However, Pop Art is not a revolutionary art like Impressionism or Dada.

Pop Art was not a critical movement nor were Pop artists satirizing anything that they depicted. Instead Pop artists celebrated the icons that they depicted as being reflective of mass culture. Pop Art was about commercialization and was itself commercialized by being wrapped in the sacred shroud of art. Pop Artists that created art around the icons that have
been publicized as necessities of our lives were continuing the work of the mass media. Duchamp’s use of the ready-made was a conscious effort to provide the viewer with an object that confronted the viewer with questions since it lacked information except that provided by its context, the museum. Pop Artists also used ready-made icons but along with them came a ready-made meanings, which was imbued in the object not by the viewer or the artist but by the objects publication as a commodity in an effort to have people purchase it (Kuspit 1979).

In Pop Art the viewer does not have the ability to truly read the text provided by a work of art because the work is less of a text than a carefully crafted set of values that have been marketed and sold to us. The icons in Pop Art have already been worked and reworked to appeal to the largest segment of society possible for the purpose of selling that object. Pop Artists were piggybacking on the marketing efforts of the mass media. Duchamp is quoted as stating “the creative act is not performed by the artists alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adding his contribution to the creative act” (McCarthy 2006). In Pop Art the ‘contact with the external world’ that Duchamp speaks of is not organic but synthetic and does not allow for deciphering because the ‘inner qualifications’ are prefabricated through the efforts of publicizing products for our consumption.

Pop Art conflates the popular in the market sense with popular culture, which are two very different ideas. What society as a group of people consumes is popular because it has been marketed to appeal to a wide base of consumers while popular culture consists of all the things that we do or have done such as norms, customs, folkways, shared values and goals (Hall 2009). Because we live in a consumer culture does not mean that what we consume in mass is the embodiment of our culture. To insinuate that culture is what we consume through the market is to debase our cultural practices. Limiting culture to what we consume is also to ignore the process of doing culture. Culture takes its form from the continued tension between popular culture and the dominant culture, which has less to do with our market practices and more to do with our social norms and practices (Hall 2009).

Pop Art artists and the dominant culture share a similar interest in both wanting to tap into the power of celebrity, branded goods, and advertising for the purpose of selling their products. Sociologist Theodor Adorno writes “art which informs us about reality was always
accompanied by ‘instructions for use’, which inform us about art and today both have become conflated.” (Adorno 1991:68). Art which has historically imitated life is no longer serving that function because we are living in a state of reified consciousness that leads us to believe that what we are sold constitutes life, and is reflective of our state of being. As philosopher, critic, and art historian Donald B. Kuspit (1979:34) states “pop art is essentially a publicity agent for already familiar illusion- illusions which seem to dissipate, but by their art codification gain renewed vigor”. Reified consciousness is traditionally produced by the hegemonic practices that limit our realization of the self as it is reflected in our daily practice of culture. However, Pop Art possibly unwittingly, embraces a reified consciousness and repackages it in the glamorous veneer of art.

The mass media contribute to the creation of a reified consciousness to sell us commodities and the same strategies and tactics are used by Pop Artists to sell their works. The icons used by Pop artists constitute a manufactured consciousness so that we may relate to them and purchase them while simultaneously incorporating aspects of the art world’s values to gain legitimacy in the art market. Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Tom Wesselmann and Robert Rauschenberg, all included in their art commodities in what appears to be a satirical manner, as well as references to art history while at the same time having a background in commercial art (Mamiya 1994). Pop artists not only exploited the publicity of commercialized objects but also the publicity of individuals for the purpose of selling their own art. Many Pop artists referenced other artist in their works often mimicking them outright. Andy Warhol’s Toilet, makes reference to Duchamp’s Fountain, Lichtenstein's Bedroom at Arles, is a duplicate of Vincent Van Gough’s painting of the same title in Lichtenstein’s characteristic style, and Tom Wesselmann’s Still Life #20 includes a reproduction of a painting by Piet Mondrian.

Consumer culture is “one is which the activities and ethics of a society are determined by patterns of consumption” which is what Pop Art was celebrating and perpetuating (Mamiya 1994:215). Lichtenstein provides some incite into the view of pop artists when he states:

The world is outside. Pop art looks at it and accepts this environment, which is neither good nor bad… and if you ask me how one can love moronization, how one can love the mechanization of work, how one can love bad art, I answer: I see it, it’s here, it’s the world. (Kuspit 1979:33)
The use of pop stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and Elizabeth Taylor by Andy Warhol is an effort on Warhol’s part to tap into the pre-marketed icons selling power. Critique and art historian Michael Fried states “an art like Warhol’s is necessarily parasitic upon the myths of its time, and indirectly therefore upon the machinery of fame and publicity that market these myths” (McCarthy 2006:358). The myth that Fried refers to in using Hollywood stars is found in the actors manufactured image. Monroe and Presley were both overly sexualized characters and represented an idealized form of both genders, which was how they were marketed.

The source material for Pop Art consisted of imagery from film, radio and magazines, which all promote the products that they sell. Mass media shapes consumers ideas about morality through telling them what constitutes good or bad consumer behavior, which than plays out in consumer practices that shape our social landscape. If elements of a culture that is promoted through the mass media make their way into our social patterns and norms the result is not a true expression of culture but rather the expression of a propaganda influenced culture (Kuspit 1979). Culture and art are both shaped through dialectic, a back and forth between conflicting ideas where one can be said to be reflective, inspired or rejecting of the other. However, when art becomes the product of forces external and hostile to the development of culture, than the resulting art derails the development of culture and becomes propaganda.

**GRAFFITI ART: THE ANTITHESIS MOVEMENT**

New styles and trends in art are not often well received by critics and other members of the art world. Graffiti Art is unique among art forms because it is the only art style to arise without any reference to other art movements and the artist is usually unknown. Not only does Graffiti Art constitute a unique textual category, it carries with it a dissident anti-establishment aesthetic (Raychaudhar 2010). When practiced in its traditional manner graffiti always entails breaking the law by defacing private property. The concept behind graffiti is also unique because it grew out of the tradition of literally making you mark upon the world, your tag or street name, in various visible places in various styles and graphics. Graffiti is a moment in art where the artist is truly free to express any idea in any style, form and place.
Most individuals that practice graffiti are commonly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, for which graffiti does not constitute art in the sense that it does for individuals who visit museums. Art consumers who view art in a museum setting are acknowledging that the works housed in the museum are worthy of the power and status of art. Graffiti Art does not ask for permission or approval from the gatekeepers that stand vigilantly at the entry to the art world nor seeks the legitimized status of artist that the art world can bestow on an individual. The similarity between Graffiti Art and Pop Art is their efforts to represent aspects of our everyday lives that are reflective of our culture, other than that they are polar opposites.

Pop Art was reflective of capitalistic values in every step of the way from idea to execution. Pop Art claimed to express popular culture as it was sold to us through the efforts of our mass media then repackaged it for higher consumption by reframing consumer goods as art. Pop Art’s effort to show us what we are by showing us what we consume is flawed in its attempt to depict culture. What Pop Artists did was to further commercialize a commodity and call it culture, which functions as a stamp of approval for consumer culture as a whole. Pop Art reifies consumer culture at the expense of the expression of our true social norms, patterns, shared values, goals and traditions. However, Graffiti Art like Dada makes the claim that our entire system is broken and we must start with a clean slate, which means working outside the art world.

Graffiti Art in its early form consisted of writing one’s name or surname, called a tag or mural like drawing on walls and subways cars using spray paint. The consumers of the graffiti were other graffiti writers that would gather at locations known as writers corners where many subway cars would converge from all over the city (Lachmann 1988). Richard Lachmann (1988) attempts to provide insight into the ideology of graffiti artists by studying how they measured their success as writers. Lachmann posits that inclusion in gallery shows did not constitute success, as it would in a traditional art, but rather that is was viewed as one of the rewards of success. The only true indicators of a writers success in the field was derived by the reception of other writers, which implies that writers were able to resist market efforts to impose their values on graffiti writers and their works (Lachmann 1988).

Graffiti Art is also unique because formalist evaluations do not have the ability to evaluate its aesthetic qualities (Alden Riggle 2010). In the early days of graffiti writing
success was measured in the street reputation that a writer carried. In modern graffiti there is also no way to allow for a formalist evaluation because the standards of evaluating the aesthetics of art do not take into consideration that the context of the street is what gives much of Graffiti Art its meaning (Alden Riggle 2010). Graffiti Art is antithetical to the standards of the art world largely due to the fact that it takes place in the public sphere of the streets where we live and spend most of our time when not at home or at work. Whereas museums are private institutions that exist for the sole purpose of presenting objects that have been deemed worthy of a status higher than what we would see outside of the museum walls.

Sociologist, philosopher, and musicologist Theodor Adorno states,

> The culture industry is the purposeful integration of its consumers form above. It also forces a reconciliation of high and low art, which have been separated for thousands of years, a reconciliation which damages them both. High art is deprived of its seriousness because its effect is programmed; low art is put in chains and deprived of the unruly resistance inherent in it when social control was not yet total. (Adorno 1991:29)

Adorno is speaking to the efforts of the culture industry to both unify and pacify us at once through the promotion of one universal culture. When Adorno speaks of high art being programmed he is referring to the fact that high art that is a product of hegemony has an intended function, which is to present itself as the reflection of good cultural values embodied in ‘good’ art.

However, the afore mentioned good values are a reflection of the interest of powerful social leaders who are promoting a particular ideology that supports their well-being. Adorno’s reference to low art being put in chains and deprived of resistance refers to the culture industries attempt to commodify art forms that are reflective of values common to the working class, not the ruling class. By commodifying the values of the working class these values are stripped of any subversive power because they are now entering into the sphere of a culture that belongs to those in power, the sphere of the culture industry. When ideas that are resistant to consumer culture are themselves consumed and become a part of consumer culture they are deprived of their subversive voice and are now expressive of that which they originally were combatting.

High art that is reflective of the values of the ruling class is appraised in the same manner as low art that is reflective of working class values. The practice of using high art as a reference point for evaluating low art results in the meaning of low art becoming
standardized along the lines of high art because it must now represent high art’s values, which limits low arts range of creative expression to what is good according to the value standards of high art. When the same standards are used to evaluate the aesthetic of an art that negates the aesthetic values of high art, it can no longer function as a form of resistance to the hegemony of the art world because it is now functioning within the realm of high art and its limited range resulting from the art worlds hegemonic restrictions.

In other words to refuse the acknowledgement that art can represent various values is damaging to all art because different and opposing values are judged by the same rubric. The culture industry’s promotion and fostering of the understanding of culture as a literal grey area in order to incorporate both black and white leads to a loss at both ends of the spectrum. Graffiti art exists and operates in the ends of the spectrum of black and white, in the areas that the culture industry has cut off in order to streamline the selling of a universal culture. In so doing Graffiti Art follows in the ideology of the Dada movement by producing art external to the art world and the market values that are its lifeblood.

Graffiti Art is also antithetical because it rejects the institutions of the art world, especially museums and galleries. Thus far I have used the term hegemony to describe the dominating practices of the art world, however, the definition of hegemony put forth by political theorists’ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is more apt for this instance. Laclau states, “a class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized” (Storey 2009). Graffiti Art is critical of the world we live in and by working outside the art world they are able to avoid the culture industry’s neutralization of their message of a possible different world.

Graffiti Art is counter-hegemonic in the Laclauian sense in two ways; firstly it can be destructive as an expression of disapproval with the current state of affairs. Secondly street art is counter-hegemonic by being constructive and presenting alternative realities to the world that are not alienating or expressive of elitist interests. However, high art can also exercise theses counter-hegemonic strategies, which will be addressed in chapter three. Street Artist Katsu refers to himself as a graffiti writer who seeks to “strategically execute systematic vandalism” as a way to “subvert the urban environment” (Schacter 2013:28).
Katsu engages in what he calls “conceptual graffiti” to produce as much of his work as possible in visible places (Schacter 2013:28).

In 2011 Katsu applied his concept of conceptual graffiti to send a message to the art world by spraying his name in massive letters through the use of an adapted fire extinguisher on the entrance wall of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles the night before the opening of the “Art in the streets” exhibition (Schacter 2013). According to Katsu the piece was an effort to “test Jeffery Deitch’s motives” who was the curator of the show. Katsu’s message was clearly to see if Jeffery Deitch was really interested in street art, which as its name implies should take place in the street, or whether he was just interested in cashing in on a current trend in art. Katsu received the answer to his inquiry when the museum immediately removed the tag. In an act of respect, sympathy and validation, many fellow street artists who were included in the show refused to paint over the erased shadow of Katsu’s tag (Schacter 2013).

Katsu’s art is not about beautifying the space that we live in, rather his goal is to upset the social structure that we have in place. Katsu’s work is of the destructive type because it aims to occupy our lived spaces and the only approval that he seeks is from other street artists (Schacter 2013). Katsu’s idea of occupying the city is a common theme in street art and while his style of art seeks to breakdown the promoted aesthetic of our lived spaces other streets artists choose to occupy cities in a constructive manner. Another common theme addresses in street art is the idea of challenging the notion that public space can be bought and owned by private interests (Anindya 2010).

The infamous graffiti artists Banksy states:

Any Advert in public space that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours. You can do whatever you like with it. Asking for permission is like asking to keep a rock that someone has just been thrown at your head. They have re-arranged the world to put themselves in front of you. They never asked for your permission, don’t even start asking for theirs. (Anindya 2010:53)

Banksy’s sentiment is shared by many street artists who view their acts of vandalism as legitimized due to its efforts to re-appropriate public spaces that serve private interests

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3 When using the term destructive to speak of Katsu’s art, it refers to the destruction of things that are designed to destructive to humanity, to our quality of life, soul and lived experience; therefore his destruction is not really destructive.
negating their intended purpose and using it for his own. One of the pioneering figures in the street art movement to base his work largely on the concept of re-appropriating private images in public spaces is artists Ron English (Schacter 2013).

Ron English describes himself as a “dogmatic propagandist with a built-in sense of humor” (Schacter 2013). English’s efforts to reclaim public space are best exemplified in his billboard takeovers where he affixes his hand painted works over existing billboard advertisements. English is also critical of modern American culture and commonly uses pop icons in his works which he refers to as “Popaganda”, which is also the name of his website (Schacter 2013). English’s works range from depicting a grossly overweight Ronald McDonald, to billboards for Fox News that read “WE DECIDE. YOU BELIEVE”, to mock Pringles ads that read, “Compulsive Consumerism, Once you shop you just can’t stop” (Schacter 2013). Ron English is a pioneering streets artist who is primarily concerned with taking back what he sees as public spaces that express the values or lack thereof of private interests, which are imposed upon the public.

The concern with artists who share in the views of Ron English and Banksy is that our public spaces are full of ideas that are for the benefit of a private organization that does not have the public’s best interests in mind, and they seek to reclaim that space. The impact of street art stems from its palimpsest qualities. When we view a piece of street art the read plays out in a particular way precisely because we are aware that is it done over an existing privatized property, and in the case of Ron English it is clear that a message has been overtaken to present a new message. Philosopher Nicholas Alden Riggle (2010) sums up the aesthetic of street are best by stating “for street art, that artists use of the street must be integral to its significance, that is, must contribute essentially to its meaning” (246).

The streets element is what gives street art its power and is what positions it as oppositional to museum art. Once street art is taken out of the street it loses a fundamental part of its read and placed in a museum becomes inauthentic in part because it has entered an “art space” (Riggle 2010:246). For the same reason that street art in a museum is no longer street art, public art does not constitute street art. When public art is placed in the streets it is not street art because viewers recognize it as art, which they know belongs in the art space of the museum that has now taken over a piece of the street to create a “museum-in-public” (Riggle 2010: 255). Riggle (2010) uses the example of Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc as an
example of public art that at best constitutes bad street art due to the fact that Serra’s sculpture is site specific thereby transforming the street into an art space by putting in the street something that is expressive of the interests of the art world.

Public art does take place outside the museum walls but it carries to those spaces the values of the art world, which transforms the meaning of the streets. Street art does not seek to transform the street but to use it as part of the meaning behind the art that is created there. For art to be recognized as art it must be treated as art and for a place to be the street it must be treated as the street, but when public art enters the street it becomes a place for art, which just happens to be in the street (Riggle 2010). The aesthetic of vandalism that gives much of its meaning to street art can never truly be present in public art. What the museum provides for art and the streets adds to street art are incommensurable due the fact that they stem from opposing ideologies towards art.

Art and street are so much at odds that Banksy refuses to refer to himself as an artist stating of art “the word has a lot of negative connotations and it alienated people, so no, I don’t like to use the word “art” at all” (Raychaudhary 2010). Many street artists are critical of street artist who choose to show in museums because they view it as selling out their ideals and conforming to the standards of the art world. Although Banksy, Ron English, and several other street artists have shown in galleries and museums they always return to the streets where their work originated and can carry out its intended function with the greatest amount of impact. The art world can’t help but acknowledge the impact that street art is making worldwide and has attempted to incorporate it into its portfolio and monopolize on its success.

In 2005 the Sony Corporation hired young street artists to paint anime inspired kids with the PlayStation Portable on wall spaces across the country, which were rented by Sony for a two-week period (Banet-Weiser 2011). The kids painted in the ads were depicted in slouchy form, with baggy clothes and backwards baseball caps (Banet-Weiser 2011). The fact that Sony felt the need to depict the kids in the street art as representing countercultural fashion trends constitutes an effort on the part of Sony to monopolize on youth culture as a means to sell their product. Museums are also eager to capitalize on the popularity of Graffiti Art and in 2008 Tate Modern in London commissioned six internationally well know street
artists to produce large works on Tate’s iconic river façade, the first effort of its kind to incorporate street art (Stallabrass 2013).

Tate Modern has further embraced Graffiti Art by devoting a section of its bookstore to Street Art and Graffiti publications as well as publishing and selling their own books on the subject while also selling graffiti style stencils, stickers and badges (Stallabrass 2013). In 2011 the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles also gave its own nod of approval to the Graffiti Art moment by holding its first major retrospective exhibition on Street Art (Stallabrass 2013). It is clear that the art world wants to begin to let Graffiti Art into the sacred realm of art but its motivation for doing so is still unclear. While the inclusion of Graffiti Art is a clear benefit to museums and companies that use the images power to confer a sense of modernity and trendiness while providing an environment for Graffiti Artists to legally produce works and get paid for it, Graffiti Art as a whole is debased in the process.

The aesthetic of vandalism made possible in Graffiti Art through it use of the street is lost when the works are moved out of the street or reproduced in a book or magazine (Raychaudhar 2010). It is a precarious road that Graffiti Artists must walk in staying true to their ideals while trying to make the greatest amount of impact with their work, which is facilitated by working within the art world. The efforts of the Art world are precisely what Adorno (1991) warns against in his writings of the culture industry by stating “monopoly is the executor: eliminating tension it abolishes art along with conflict” (Adorno 1991). The antithetical stance and subversive power of Graffiti Art is stripped when it begins to work under the ideals that it necessarily negates.

The process of entering the art world entails conforming to the standards and practices of the art in order to be legitimized within it. Anindya Raychaudhar applies Adorno’s idea of monopoly as executor apply to Graffiti Art by writing “once graffiti art deserts the streets, it is subsumed in the world of mainstream art – and as such can be analyzed, criticized and packaged as a product precisely because it is no longer a threat” (Raychaudhar 2010:56). Graffiti Art must not venture too deep into the art world or it may never be able to exit unscathed from the black hole that is the art word, forcing its influence on the looming art forms that exist near its monopolized sphere of creativity.
CHAPTER 4

READING BETWEEN THE LINES:
DECIPHERING THE TEXT OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

Money complicates everything, I have a genuine belief that art is a more powerful currency than money- that’s the romantic feeling that an artist has. But you start to have this sneaking feeling that money is more powerful.

--Damien Hirst

The previous chapter elucidated that contemporary art does not have to look like what most people think of when they imagine a work of art. In contemporary art the idea or concept is the real star of the work and the form follows from what the artists believes will best convey their idea to the viewer. However, if the idea is too detached from the form that a work of art takes, it can be difficult for viewers to appreciate it. Confusion around understanding contemporary art is furthered if the work is conflated with a very high price. When confronted with an obscure piece of contemporary art the viewer often feels that they do not “get it” and this state is advanced when the piece of art is renowned for its high price, which is associated with a valuable product, which for the viewer translates into the piece being a “good” work of art.

From our economic activities as well as our social interactions, we come to associate a high price with certain things such as quality, status, prestige and power. When we see a commodity that is highly priced we assume that it is of good quality or a luxury good, but is this also true for art? If a viewer see’s an ambiguous work of contemporary art that they “don’t get”, does a high price tag suffice in convincing them that the piece is a quality work of art? The answer to that question varies depending on whom you ask, an art viewer, an art dealer, a collector or an auctioneer at Christie’s. In the art world you will find some people who believe that art and money should not be too close because art is not about money, while others have no problem with the fact that money is the art world’s lifeblood in many crucial ways.
ART’S TOP BRANDS

The standard economics model under which capitalism operates claims to follow the laws of supply and demand, which states that prices reflect demand so when demand is high and supply low prices rise, when supply is abundant and demand is low prices fall. The art world functions within our larger capitalistic system, but it does so on its own terms. Economist Olav Velthuis (2007) examines American and Dutch art markets resulting in the identification of two opposing views of the market and provides some incite into its opaque economic practices. The two contrasting views of the market identified by Velthuis are (1) the independent spheres perspective, which posits that economy and culture constitute two separate spheres that function autonomously from each other, and (2) the contamination perspective, which posits that relations between the sphere of culture and that of economics is allowed for, but that the relations leads price to contaminate the cultural value of art (Velthuis 2007).

I adhere to and argue for the viewpoint put forth by Velthuis’s (2007) second perspective, which states that art is contaminated by the effects of money. In the last two decades the prices paid for art have skyrocketed, especially for contemporary works of art, which is odd from an economic perspective since contemporary artists are still alive and therefore their work is not fixed in quantity like that of old masters. Certain figures in the art world are well known because of the high prices that they deal in, such as artists Jeff Koons, Damian Hirst and Takashi Murakami as well as collector and dealer Charles Saatchi. My primary concern in this chapter is to address the issue of whether works by blue chip artists such as Koons and Hirst are taken to represent avant-garde art at its best, hence the high price, or whether the high price itself becomes the art works’ dominant text taking precedent over the works content and form.

So how does a contemporary artwork such as The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living created by Damien Hirst arrive to be sold for twelve million dollars, as this piece of contemporary art reportedly sold for? Hirst is a member of a movement, which is more like a cohort of artists, known as the young British artists referred to as yBas.

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4 A blue chip artist is one who is still alive but whose reputation is so secure that any work that they produce will be valuable (Rothenberg 2014).
(Gompertz 2012). Hirst’s *Impossibility of Death* is a large tiger shark that is suspended in a formaldehyde filled Plexiglas case, which fell apart and was remade using another shark and more formaldehyde. Integral to Hirst’s career and the making of *Impossibility of Death* is art collector Charles Saatchi, who bought Hirst’s first Plexiglas piece and later funded the creation of *Impossibility of Death* (Thompson 2008). Both Hirst and Saatchi are what Economist Don Thompson (2008) refers to as branded, which means that they have name recognition that can add value to artworks as the result of carefully marketed careers.

Hirst and Saatchi first met in 1988 at *Freeze* an art show put on by Hirst, which included several of his cohorts from Goldsmiths College, which is where Saatchi first purchased Hirst’s *A Thousand Years* (Thompson 2008). In 1990, Saatchi purchased two of Hirst’s medicine cabinets, which are one of Hirst’s signature bodies of work. Saatchi then put up 50,000 pounds for Hirst to produce *Impossibility of Death*, which was then sold to Steven Cohen for 12 million dollars through art dealer Larry Gagosian (Thompson 2008). The sale of the work for such a high price brought about a lot of media publicity, the type of publicity that plays an integral role in producing branded art figures like Hirst and Saatchi. At the time that Hirst sold his shark for 12 million dollars Saatchi already owned works by Hirst, which subsequently increased in value when *Impossibility of Death* sold for its incredibly high price (Thompson 2008). From the selling of this one piece of art several things occurred; Hirst was started on his path to becoming a branded artist, Saatchi increased the value of the Hirst works in his collection, and Steve Cohen who bought the work agreed to donate it to MOMA in New York resulting in Cohen being offered a position on MOMA’s board of directors.

All the parties involved seemed to benefit from the transaction, Hirst’s reputation as an artist greatly improved, Saatchi’s own collection increased in value as well as his status as a dealer, and Cohen gets a boost in his elite status as an art collector and board member at MOMA, while Larry Gagosian’s reputation as an art dealer is furthered as well. This transaction constitutes a process known as placement, where a dealer sells a work of art to affect the provenance of art since provenance is the most important aspect of determining the value of a work of art (Gompertz 2012). The hierarchy of placement goes from branded Museums such as the Guggenheim, MOMA N.Y. or London and so on, to branded collectors such as Saatchi and lastly long-known collectors (Thompson 2008). Often for the purpose of placement, dealers have an agreement with artists they represent in either a formal or
informal manner to discount prices when it is worthwhile to place a piece of art in an important collection due to the perceived benefits of the work being placed there (Thompson 2008).

Saatchi’s own collection of Hirst art increased in value firstly by selling it at an incredibly high price to a collector, but more so by the collector donating it to MOMA who by accepting it, places the institution’s stamp of approval on Hirst’s art. Placement can be done as in this instance to increase the value of art, however, it is also done to try to exercise some control over price, which is connected to who the work is sold to. A dealer like Betty Parsons, referenced in Chapter One, is concerned with fostering the growth of an artist throughout their career and wants to provide stability and will use placement in a different way. For a dealer who is not primarily concerned with reaching a high price but rather longevity, good placement will consist of selling to collectors who are not buying art for speculative reasons.

For a dealer who plays the role of midwife to the career of an artist, good placement is a collector who will donate the work to a museum or keep it in their collection for a long time, or a branded museum who will not sell at auction when the possibility of a good return presents itself (Thompson 2008). Basically for a dealer who cares about the longevity of the artists that they represent, good placement means minimizing or getting rid of, if possible, the commodity character of the work of art in favor for its formalist and cultural characteristics (Velthuis 2013). Both art dealers and auctions houses have a specific client in mind. Auctions houses have a list of financial elites and dealers have knowledge of collectors who will not run to resell at auction. Velthuis (2013) found that price dispersion is a structural feature of the art market resulting in paying different prices for similar work. What price dispersion means for an art dealer is that they must react when a work by an artist they represent has sold at auction either too high or too low. If a work sells at a really high price due to a bidding war, then the market dictates that the dealer should raise the price of the works of the artist correspondingly, which does not always happen (Velthuis 2013). If a work of art sells for a low price or not at all, then the dealer and the artists standing in the art world are hurt. Unlike prices for goods outside the art world, prices for art must never come down (Thompson 2008).
Art dealers gain notoriety largely because they are seen as being able to recognize talented artists, which they then represent. If an artist is not selling well or has been selling at decreasing prices it reflects poorly on the dealer’s judgment to recognize quality art and rather than lower prices on an artist’s works the dealer will let the artist go (Thompson 2008). The only time when it is considered acceptable to lower the price of a work of art of an artist is when they change galleries or in the form of discounts that are offered select patron for placement purposes (Velthuis 2013). Prices are often tricky things to ascertain in the art world and galleries never clearly post prices or discuss pricing out in the open. Most dealers try as much as possible to distance prices form the works they sell and all real business talk takes place in a back room of the gallery where prices can be discussed in a private setting where the profane effects of commodification do not taint the sacred space occupied by art (Velthuis 2013).

Art dealers try as much as possible to have a fixed price for the work of an artist because they have invested time and energy into developing the artist’s career. A dealer interviewed by Velthuis (2007:90) states that “auctions are a very unfair test for the artist” and that “it interferes with the prices that have been carefully built up with the help of repeated sales by the dealer”. Dealers concerned with their artists career longevity will slowly elevate the prices of artists after successive successful shows, which are spaced about a year apart and most dealers would much rather sellout a show every time then drastically raise the price and not sell all the work in a show or any at all (Thompson 2008). In efforts to negate the market and counteract price fluctuations that result from high auction prices, dealers will set prices lower than demand dictates and establish wait list denying demand and restrict rather than increase the liquidity of artwork (Velthuis 2013).

However, dealers who are concerned with producing branded artists will use potentially risky tactics to elevate the price of their artists, such as the case of Charles Saatchi and artist Jenny Saville. Jenny Saville is an artist whose work consists of large canvas paintings of female nudes that often appear to have suffered a beating, with sharp lines of reddish hues that resemble bruising. When representing Jenny Saville, Saatchi gave her art “live or die” prices of 100,000 dollars a painting on her first show of six large painting in 1999 and all the pieces sold (Thompson 2008). Saatchi took a big risk by setting prices so high on her high because it’s an all or nothing tactic where potentially none of Saville’s work
could have sold. However, because Saatchi gambled and won he increased the value of Saville’s art through his branding power and subsequently limited Saville’s production-for-sale to six paintings a year to increase demand (Thompson 2008). After Saville’s show she had a waiting list of twenty-four names, which due to her dealer imposed limit on production represents potentially four years of output that is waiting to be purchased (Thompson 2008).

Price dispersion is a structural feature of the art market because dealers try to negate the market effects produced by auctions and price manipulation, as in the case of Jenny Saville, in order to create longevity for the works created by the artists that they represent. Dealers try to establish the career of an artist through marketing them and trying to control the biography of the works of art that they sell. Speaking openly of the price of art is taboo because quality in art is not quantifiable and morally detrimental to the sacred social space attributed to art and the insight that it provides about our human condition. Price indices do not report price drops and the prices of art function under what economist refer to as the ratchet affect, which states that once prices for the work of an artists go up they lock in and it is practically impossible for them to go down (Thompson 2008).

It’s not only dealers and collectors who try to manipulate price, but also artists who brand themselves in an effort to manipulate the value of their art by making themselves as celebrities. Andy Warhol was among the earliest and most successful of branded artists whose persona was integral to the aesthetic of his art; he embraced the commodification of his work and his subjects to the extent that his personality often took precedence over his work (Thompson 2008). Individuals in the art world who strive to become branded share Warhol’s practice and view today. Gompertz (2012) sums up the trend of branding specifically with reference to Japanese artists Takashi Murakami when he writes of Murakami, “he is unapologetic and determined in his pursuit of making his work a commodity: to do so is part of his art” (Gompertz 2012:384).

Takashi Murakami’s art is a Japanese superflat style that incorporates anime and magna comic books. Murakami is represented by Larry Gagosian, who’s branding power so great that newly added artists to the Gagosian stable can see the price their art increase up to ten fold (Thompson 2008). Murakami’s art is produced in a method similar to Andy Warhol’s factory setting where assistants work off the artists’ ideas to manufacture art, which Jeff Koonzs and Damien Hirst also use as their production method. Murakami also produces
sculptures, which reference anime and it’s overt sexuality such as *My Lonesome Cowboy*, which depicts a nude anime style character with spiked hair and large eyes, with one hand holding his erect reddish penis that is emitting a semen stream shaped like a cowboy’s lasso over his head. *My Lonesome Cowboy* sold at auction for 13.5 million in 2008 (Gompertz 2012). Murakami is not alone in his marketing practices, most contemporary artists surround themselves with a slick public relations machine and image and branding are as important to today’s artists as they are to any other multinational business (Gompertz 2012: 384).

Murakami’s successful branding practices are evident in his affiliation with rapper Kanye West after Murakami produced the album cover for West’s *Graduation* album as well as producing designs for Louis Vuitton’s luxury handbags.

Individuals in the art world who strive to become branded do so by means similar to large corporations who are in the business of making us want their goods by associating their product with a particular attitude, view or lifestyle (Gompertz 2012). Warhol was so good at branding that you can find his brand on Pierre water bottles and Vidal Sassoon hair products. Vidal Sassoon’s ad references Warhol’s style to associate their product with Warhol who was known for his over the top wigs. Tracy Emin is renowned for her sexuality and ladette style of being as crude, noisy, and rebellious as men get to be, appears partially nude in a Beck’s beer ad and also appears in Bombay gin ads with the ad reading “Bad girls like Bombay gin”, but why is an artists lending her person to promote booze? Emin’s work deals with sexuality such as *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, which is a camping tent with the names of her sexual partners sown into the inside of the tent and *My Bed*, which consists of a messy bed with condoms, alcohol bottles, clothes and cigarette butts thrown about. Emin’s persona is that of a sexualized, drinking rebel and that is what is used as a marketing tool, which means that Emin herself is a means of increasing consumer interest, as much as if not more so than her art.

Branding is done for the sole purpose of commerce and constitutes an effort of increasing commodification. Individuals in the art world who are concerned with becoming branded are veering art away from its expression of culture and our lived conditions in exchange for an expression of market values. A branded artist is not producing art, which stems from creativity but rather a commodity whose primary concern is to entertain and conform to what sells well, which includes manipulating the artist’s image to promote
interests in their persona in order to help convince consumers that their product is desirable. Branding is a manufactured desirability of art that is partially the cause for the high selling prices attached to contemporary works of art, which distorts the character of art by making it a commodity rather than a cultural good.

**ARTS USE-VALUE IN ACQUIRING STATUS**

Sam Koontz who was referenced in Chapter One, and Charles Saatchi are clear examples of dealers who are more about the business of the art world and less about the cultural labor and growth that occurs in the art world. There is no one archetypical model of an art dealer or collector who has the “right” mix of the business and cultural side of art and all individuals in the art world walk a fine line between culture and commerce. However, the history of art makes it clear that art has long served a purpose other than as the expression of culture or formalist appreciation of draftsmanship, but rather as a symbol of status. The idea of art as a sign of status has been met with contempt and has been the spark that ignites movements in art such as the French Impressionists, Dadaists and Mexican muralists of the early eighteenth century to name a few, all of which had as their ideological foundation the denunciation of elitist appropriations of art.

Karl Marx’s (1990) concept of use-value is helpful in understanding the use of art as a luxury commodity. Marx (1990:125) states “every useful thing is a whole composed of many properties; it can therefor be useful in various ways”, which means that the same thing can have multiple uses for different people and situations. Historically social elites and royalty used art to express and reinforce their status and with the increasing commodification of art, the use of art as a status symbol is commonplace today to the extent that the work of many branded artists reads primarily as a luxury good, not art. Velthuis (2007:9) writes “consumption is at once determinant and expressive of identity” therefore wealthy elites consume art because doing so reinforces their class and financial status as well as because purchasing expensive art is what elite wealthy individuals do.

The *Mona Lisa* is helpful in providing an example of use-value. The *Mona Lisa* is among the most recognizable works of art ever to be produced and the Louvre receives so much traffic from people wishing to view the *Mona Lisa* that the painting has its own entrance into the museum to streamline the process. People go to see the *Mona Lisa* because
the painting is renowned as a renaissance masterpiece. However, if the painting was to come up at auction, estimates for price it could reach range from one to one and a half billion dollars making it the most expensive work of art ever (Velthuis 2013). Yet, because the *Mona Lisa* has not recently been sold, the viewing public does not primarily read the painting as the most expensive piece of art ever made, which would likely trump it’s standing as a masterpiece for most viewers.

When the commodity character in a work of art is emphasized, the work is used differently than if it was primarily recognized as a cultural, social or anthropological artifact. An important part of the art world however, does revolve around the use-value of art as a luxury commodity. Having status, often achieved through spending or making money in the art world is the necessary, but not sufficient means to gain access to VIP perks such as early entry to shows and art fairs, access to parties and talks, as well as seats on the board of museums, which are all instances that reinforce the class standing of financial elites or branded art world figures. As mentioned before money is the lifeblood of the art world, but the emphasis that is placed on money and Its transparency in a digitally globalized world is detrimental to the advance of art and runs the risk of killing art all together.

The art market attempts to quantify art in order to make it fit into our capitalistic model, however, art is a qualitative matter and the two are incommensurable as Velthuis (2013:24) writes” the art market is a site where human action is informed by two contradictory or conflicting logics: a logic of art and a logic of capitalistic values”. For collectors seeking to stay current in their status seeking efforts, all that is needed is what economist Don Thompson refers to as “buying with your ears”, which means buying what a branded dealer tells them is “good” art at which point it is not uncommon for collectors to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for a work of art without even seeing it first (Thompson 2008). In instances of buying with your ears, it is clear that speculative and status considerations of the buyer prevail over the arts aesthetic or cultural features.

**ESTRANGED ART**

Philosopher, Sociologist and political theorist Herbert Marcuse (1978) provides a crucial contribution to the discussion of aesthetics. Marcuse’s concern with aesthetics is that art must be autonomous and not tainted with external influences in order to provide an
aesthetic experience, which is an altered state of consciousness (Marcuse 1978). When the
text of a work of art is dominated by reading primarily as a commodity, it becomes just
another thing, a commodity, of the same kind that we encounter in our everyday lives. It
becomes expressive of our standard reality, which is presented to us as one-dimensional,
homogeneous and conformist. When art reads as a commodity there is no dialectic intricacy
that is requisite to culture, instead art is fixed. In this one-dimensional art there will be no
avant-garde because creativity has been conditioned to explore and experiment only within
the imposed limited range of thought and experiences that the dominant world-view allows
for. In this environment of enforced limited creativity the ability to put forward a different
world-view is hindered and there will be no aesthetic experience or autonomy because art is
just like everything else that we purchase.

Marcuse states “the concept of art as an essentially autonomous and negating productive force contradicts the notion which sees art as performing an essentially
dependent, affirmative-ideological function, that is to say, glorifying and absolving the existing society” (1978:11). An autonomous art does not simply reflect the world as it is,
implying that our social structures are not problematic as Pop Art did, ignoring that particular interests shape our society. Rather an autonomous art’s aesthetic experience breaths life into alternative possibilities that are not hegemonic, nor alienating but truly free to creatively explore. The efforts of autonomous art are not expressive of retreat, illusion or escapism; rather they are grounded in denouncing conformity and projecting an alternative state of mind and being to produce what Marcuse calls refers to as “counter-consciousness: negation of the realistic-conformist mind” (Marcuse 1978:9).

For Marcuse art that provides an aesthetic experience is cathartic by allowing for an alternative view, which reorients us to better understand our lived conditions resulting in increased freedom through de-alienation from being awakened to our oppressed condition, which is always the first step towards change. If art is reduced to a luxury commodity than its ability to provide freedom, creativity and true cultural expression will be lost and through the privatization of art used only for its commodity character and as it becomes transformed and distorted through speculative practices, the power of art to foster the advancement of humanity will be stripped of it. Marcuse (1978:9) writes of arts vast power “The truth of art lies in it’s power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e. of those who have
established it) to define what is real” speaking to the fact that reality is manufactured and arts text allows for a break from the imposed representation of what could be.

Money has always played a part in legitimizing the work of artists and even movements, yet emerging trends in favor of commercialization and prices for works of art in the millions is unprecedented and highly visible. The practice of branding to increase marketability is a purely financial endeavor that promotes speculation in the art world, branding is shifting the art world to a more commodified state, changing the art world in a way that is detrimental to art. Marcuse (1978:41) writes “In this sense art is inevitably part of that which is and only as part of that which is does it speak against that which is”, commodified art is what is living in an illusionary world and social justice based art is a constant reminder of arts ability to address and change reality and our lived conditions.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Art’s power to pose an alternative view is found in the French Impressionist who sought to break free from the hegemonic bondage that the Academies produced and enforced, in Dada’s rejection of the capitalistic rational that put profit over humanity producing alienation and discontent, in Cubism’s efforts to dismantle form and break free from the flat picture plane, and in Duchamp’s Fountain that set the stage for conceptual art. There is also the immeasurable impact that social justice art has produced especially in the 1960s and 70s when issues of gender and race tapped into art’s power to reorient the viewer to promote an awakening to a history of socially produced debasement of women and people of color. Lee Anne Bell and Dipti Desai elucidate the power of social justice art further in writing, “Situating dominant discourses and institutional structures within a historical context is another vital component of social justice work” (2011:287).

Social justice art promotes the connection of history with our personal biography awakening us to our alienated condition allowing us to image alternatives and strategies that can “sustain the collective work necessary to challenge entrenched patterns and institutions and build a different world” (Bell and Desai 2011:288). Artist Judy Chicago, born Judy Cohen changed her name to Chicago to reflect her emerging position as a feminist and launched the Feminist Art Program at Fresno state college (now CSU Fresno) in 1970, which included consciousness-raising sessions, radical artistic experimentation and research into women’s history, literature, and art (Collins 2006). What Judy Chicago discovered in her studies of art’s history is that the text of women artists does not speak to their historical conditioning resulting in their status of second-class citizens.

The photography of artist Cindy Sherman operates within the space brought to light by Judy Chicago wherein women’s circumstances are absent in the subject matter of art. Sherman steps into costumes of female clichés commonly used in Hollywood films such as the femme fetal, prostitute, sex kitten, and the housewife exposing how women are depicted in stigmatizing restrictive roles in film (Gompertz 2012). Consciousness-raising practices
that were being exercised by women artists, were simultaneously used by black American artists to liberate themselves from the disenfranchising legacy that chattel slavery had branded onto their psyche. One such group was the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), which was founded in Chicago in 1967 and painted the Wall of Respect, which revolved around the theme of black hero’s including black actors, musicians, and political and militant leaders such as Malcolm X (Collins 2006).

From within the OBAC came COBRA, which stood for Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists and would later become the Afri-COBRA, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists claimed that images seen in their exhibition could be placed in one of three categories. The first category of Afri-COBRA art was “images that deal with the past”, secondly were “images that relate to the present” and lastly “images that look into the future” (Collins 2006:742). Through connecting the past, present, and future in a historical context artists can show development in a particular direction while positing an alternative future road that breaks from the entrenched practices of the past. The conscious altering work done is the heyday of cultural and social reform of the 60s and 70s is still being carried out by artists today, but as Gompertz (2012:391) states of artists today “the inclination has been to entertain, not campaign”.

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei who helped design the birds nest stadium for the 2008 Olympics in China, produces work that revolves around his powerful political convictions often resulting in his targeting of the Chinese government, is an exception rather than the rule for art produced in the recent past (Gompertz 2012). Weiwei’s work often references the past with a modern twist to get across his message of indignation towards a repressive government with works such as Ming Dynasty vases painted with a Coca-cola logo speaking to the Chinese government’s imposed cultural insomnia. Weiwei is the clearest example that freedom hurts after being harassed, beaten and jailed by the Chinese government for voicing his criticisms of governmental actions. Weiwei is a modern activist in the truest sense and has amassed a large following on twitter and uses social media to document his art and activism.

If art becomes estranged from its power to posit new possibilities and break down established “realities”, what will be lost is arts voice to speak out against hegemony as well as it’s ability to awaken us to our state of alienation and thus begin the process of de-
alienation. As Marcuse (1978:72) writes “Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle.” Because reality as we experience it is a history of deception and illusion, art’s power to cast off the shackles of imposed reality is essential in combating the dominant discourse of reality that is forced on us to create our world-view (Marcuse 1978).

Art that is not autonomous but led by commerce exits in the realm of the culture industry, which strives to sell entertainment. In other words, when art is simply a commodity it has not only been stripped of its subversive voice but it is now another tool to indoctrinate consumers into the reality that best serves those in power. The loss of autonomy in art as a result of commercialization results in the loss one of humankind’s most powerful tools for emancipation. What is needed in the art world is for artists, dealers and museums to recognize that they operate along a spectrum with creativity at one end and commercialization at the other and the further that they are from commercialization the more that art will embody uncorrupted creativity, which will arises without being overtaken by external interests or misdirected readings resulting in a read that speaks to our lived condition rather than status or commerce.

Art has capabilities that make it unique, but those capabilities can be manipulated to create physical and mental conditions, which when in self-interested hands can be repressive in many harmful ways. Historically art has been used as a tool to promote lines of thought simultaneously negating others, though it is art’s application as a window into an alternative world and reality that holds most promise. It was art’s ability to imagine otherwise that was distorted by the Nazi’s to promote the reality that they wanted by attempting to redefine German culture through art. It’s that same ability to imagine otherwise that allowed issues of race, gender, war, genocide, and all forms of violent oppression to be critiqued and dialogued about openly that is at stake of being lost to commercial practices.
REFERENCES


