

‘Selling Used Cars, Carpets, and Art: Aesthetic and Financial Value in Contemporary Art’

Art, it would seem, in its empathic modern sense at least, is irreducibly aesthetic. That is, one reason it is taken to be culturally important is because it offers something – a pleasure of the senses, in a cognitively expanded interpretation – which exceeds and ruptures the fixity of determinate judgement, in a singular but logically indeterminate manner.

Peter Osbourne¹

Introduction

At the outset of a lecture I gave some years ago on the subject of contemporary art and value, I suggested that my audience, which was made up of post-graduate students with art history degrees, ask questions where and when they felt necessary. In most cases, this offer is thankfully not taken up until after the talk. On this occasion, however, my misplaced munificence was rewarded with a question before I had a chance to make my opening remarks. The questioner was seated in the front-row and was therefore unavoidable; and her question – in all its pointedness and urgent delivery – was equally unavoidable. ‘So what’, she asked, ‘is the difference between selling contemporary art and carpets – or, for that matter, used cars?’ The enquiry, and its unexpected early intrusion into my lecture, flummoxed me for a moment, but I proffered – perhaps glibly in retrospect – the following response: although the art-world exists and operates to all intents and purposes like any other economic system or business, art itself could not be, and indeed should not be, treated as a commodity. In this response, I was expressing an obviously idealistic belief: artistic practice and financial worth should not answer to the same rules of value; indeed, they *cannot* be answerable to the same ideals insofar as aesthetic and economic value are of necessity two different things. The words, even as I uttered them – and perhaps more so now in the current ‘boom’ environment of the contemporary art market – felt compromised from the outset. In the first instance, the art-

¹ Peter Osbourne, ‘From an Aesthetic Point of View’, in *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, ed. by Peter Osbourne (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2000), pp. 1-10 (p.7).

world not only operates in a manner similar to a conventional consumerist system of commodification, but that most contentious of aesthetic terms – value – would also appear to be increasingly answerable to an economic system based upon a crude supply and demand model. How else, for example, do we account for the credulous excitement surrounding the unveiling in London of what is apparently the most expensive, if not most speculative, artwork ever made – namely, Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God*, 2007, a platinum skull covered by 8,601 diamonds, costing £12 million to make and with a purported asking-price of £50 million. It is arguable that such a work would not have been produced (*supplied*) without there being a buyer (*demand*) for it in the first place. In this instant, demand – the financial wherewithal to buy such a work – would appear to have predicated the supply; that is, the aesthetic object. Demand, likewise, would appear to be fueling the ever-increasing prices that contemporary art achieves at auction.²

This is not necessarily an anomaly in the contemporary art world: money, from wherever it originates, has been always associated with the so-called ‘fine arts’ and it is increasingly attracted to contemporary art in terms of both investment and as a so-called ‘life-style option’.³ Financial investment in contemporary art also confers a degree of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as ‘cultural capital’. Writing in 1986, Bourdieu outlined three distinct types of capital: ‘economic capital’ (which is obvious enough in itself in terms of definition); ‘social capital’ (predicated on networks of membership that confer influence and causal agency upon an individual); and, finally, ‘cultural capital’.⁴ In the latter category, the forms and applications of knowledge that give individuals a perceivable benefit, and therefore status in contemporary society, also act interchangeably with social and economic capital. They have, in sum, a negotiable quality whereby ‘cultural capital’ can become a form of economic and social capital. There is nothing particularly ground-breaking in such insights when looked at from the

² In February 2007, the Sotheby’s evening sale in London realised the highest total for any sale of contemporary art in Europe to date (£45.8 million; \$90 million), including a world record price for the most expensive living European artists at auction; £5.7m for Peter Doig’s *White Canoe* (1990-91). In New York three months later, the contemporary art sale at Sotheby’s saw Francis Bacon’s *Study After Innocent X* (1953) soar over his previous \$27 million record to \$52.6 million; whilst Andy Warhol’s *Green Car Crash* (1963) doubled its already ambitious estimate to sell for almost \$72 million. At the same sale Mark Rothko’s *White Centre* (1950) sold for \$72.8 million. All were record prices for these iconic artists and continue to reflect the exponential rise in the prices contemporary art and, as in the case of Rothko, late modern art of the post-war period.

³ For an interesting account of recent trends in both international economic structures and the contemporary art market, see JJ Charlesworth’s ‘Bonfire of the Vanities’ in *Art Monthly*, no. 305, April 2007, pp. 5-8.

⁴ See Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, in *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by J.G. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241-258.

vantage point of today: all knowledge carries a price and weight of exchange, so to speak. However, Bourdieu's model does provide us with a paradigm of sorts that sees a knowledge of aesthetic value – here equated not only with knowledge but the valency of ideas *per se* and their ability to interact with material networks of economic power – and financial value come together in a reciprocal relationship based on exchange. Aesthetic value and economic value disclose in this instant a degree of reciprocity founded upon the interchangeability of both. Furthermore, the commodified nature of much of the contemporary art world's output, always a factor of art production from at least the Renaissance onwards, is no longer seen (if indeed it ever was) in terms of being unusual in itself. On the contrary, contemporary art today is actively celebrated as a material commodity in its own right and therefore – in the wider scheme of how late capitalism produces objects of desire, be they cars or carpets – as a prioritized form of commodity fetish. And, again, this was most likely always the case, with one exception: the market for contemporary art (almost non-existent 30 years ago), is now one of the strongest markets in the art world. What is more, the art-world and its practices seem to be acutely aware of this and artists such as Jeff Koons, to name but one of the more prominent practitioners who engage both the structure and the semiotics of commodity markets, have made a career out of actively playing to the market. It is perhaps no coincidence that Koons was a commodity broker on Wall St. for six years before becoming an artist. And he is, I would readily admit, but the latest in a long line of artists cum entrepreneurs that could be traced back to the Renaissance.

Once a relatively exclusive commentator on life, contemporary art has come to be (for better or worse) firmly imbricated within life itself; so why should it not, we may ask, bear some of the hallmarks of a commodity within our commodity-based culture? Which begs the question: where does that leave my original, albeit high-minded, reply to my erstwhile questioner – which to all intents and purposes was attempting to re-assert a precarious and largely usurped ideal of a privileged autonomy for contemporary art in the early part of the 21st century? Rather than concede to the disconcerting vision of art seen solely as commodity (an object judged not by its aesthetic, contemplative value but its utilitarian value as an object of exchange), I offered a further definition to my questioner – who, it should be noted, had been less than impressed with the first offering. Art is first and foremost a creative act, I went on, and the exchange value that it accrues in our society is of secondary concern to its value as a contemplative object. In retrospect, I could have added to this and suggested that the aesthetic underwriting contemporary art has been developed, at least in part, as an investigation into the very notion of financial value – precisely the issue that I want to explore in the following discussion. This is to

focus on one aspect of contemporary aesthetic practice, and I am therefore being highly selective; nevertheless, in doing so we address a categorical dilemma that has garnered an increasingly pertinent purchase in our neo-liberal, globalized and consumerist driven western societies: if we are to look at art in terms of financial value (a view my questioner was prompting if not supporting), then the sale of contemporary art had a lot in common with the selling of any other commodity one may care to mention. If, on the other hand, we consider aesthetic value – the singular properties of an artwork and how we experience and understand the nature of those properties in an institutional and theoretical context – then it is more difficult to see art in the same category as a commodity. Contemporary art practice as a critique of commodification crystallizes precisely this dilemma and appeals to an expanded sense of the aesthetic. I should, by way of a prudent caveat, make clear a number of points here: contemporary art production – in light of the financial demands of commodity display and the exigencies of market value and consumption – does not necessarily ‘escape’ systems of commodification, but it can offer insights into certain distinctions between aesthetic and financial value and how both are accrued. In what follows, which is admittedly a potted history of contemporary art, the question we are left with is relatively simple and yet not necessarily simplistic: is there a productive distinction to be had between aesthetic and financial value; and, concomitantly, can contemporary art generate that distinction from within its own practice?

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The subject of contemporary art has become the focus of popular (if not populist) controversy and the locus for often heated national and international debate. It is not surprising, for example, to find contemporary art making front-page news, both for the record-breaking prices it regularly achieves and its occasionally controversial content. The widespread interest in contemporary art is nevertheless invariably stymied by the relatively obscure formal elements it employs and the often self-referential nature – and therefore abstruse to all but those with specialist knowledge – of the ideas it explores. How are we to interpret an unmade bed as art; or a light-switch alternating between on and off; or a mound of sweets in a corner that we are encouraged to take away with us; or, for that matter, an artist whose practice consists of making food for his friends? What contexts, moreover, can we use to ground such practices when they are apparently without precedent in the history of art? A significant element in these debates and practices involves not so much up-to-the-minute art practices, or indeed art of the last 40

years or so, as it does the work of Marcel Duchamp. In the most basic sense, Duchamp's work pointed not to the object of contemplation as such (the manifest aesthetic form of an artwork), but to the abstract thought-process behind it. The object, for Duchamp, was often the seemingly arbitrary opportunity for the reification of an idea.

Duchamp's *oeuvre* is complex and does not suffer abbreviated commentary easily; however, his theories on so-called 'non-retinal' art and his use of 'readymades' goes some way to disclosing many of the conundrums we encounter in determining both aesthetic and financial value in a contemporary context. His 'readymades', a term he first employed in 1915, were essentially 'found' objects that he nominated as art. The first, a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, dates from 1913; however, it was his *Bottle Rack* of 1914 – a mass produced bottle-drying rack signed by the artist – that is considered to be the first readymade. The most famous of these readymades, or perhaps the most infamous, is his *Fountain* of 1917. Effectively a mass-produced urinal with the one-off pseudonym 'R. Mutt' painted on it, this work goes some way to describing what Duchamp meant when he used the term 'non-retinal': the objects were chosen to refute traditionally 'retinal' artwork – art, that is to say, that existed on a purely visual level – and therefore address the realm of the intellect. Duchamp's *Fountain*, in the first instant, fundamentally questioned what art could be and, perhaps more importantly, it interrogated the nominal notion of aesthetic 'taste' – or 'value' – as a foundational criteria in the understanding of art. If anything could be designated art by the sheer volition of the artist then what differentiated the art object from any other object or commodity. And it is here that we get closer to a definition of contemporary art that is still the source of bemusement for some: it is the idea, the concept, that matters most in contemporary art practice, not the object *per se*. Which bring us to a number of essential distinctions between aesthetic and financial value: the object, sometimes of little intrinsic value, is often *just* an artefact upon which the privileged notion of the idea itself is made manifest; or, to put it another way, 'value' in aesthetic terms is inextricably associated with the idea not the object. Secondly, anyone can make the object, but it the artist who is the privileged originator of the idea to make that object in the first place. The ideal of craftsmanship and artistic skill, often a key component in attributing financial value, is elided here in favour of the concept itself.

I am no doubt simplifying the manifold issues that Duchamp addresses in his work. It is notable, for example, that his disavowal of 'retinal' art, including the visuality of painting itself, entailed a large measure of 'visual indifference' – a term which evokes a form of aesthetic indifference. In conversation with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp noted not only his indifference to the object but the absence of 'aesthetic emotion'. To the question, what

made you chose readymades as a form of artistic expression, he replied that the decision ‘depended on the object [and] at the end of fifteen days, you begin to like it or hate it. You have to approach something with indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste’.⁵ Although Duchamp was to never fully articulate a definition of the ‘readymade’ that satisfied him, the works effectively predicate aspects of the direction that contemporary art was to take in the latter half of the twentieth century. It was the idea that came first, not its material manifestation or, for that matter, the value associated with the materials used; and this has been a feature of *inter alia* Minimalism, Land Art, Conceptualism, and Performance art. Nevertheless, and herein lies the rub, Duchamp’s *Fountain* has a definitive financial value attached to it that far exceeds its nominal utilitarian value as a urinal (a standard Bedfordshire model urinal, to be precise), and this despite the fact that the original was not only lost – what we have today are reproductions of the original – but not even made by the artist in the first place. A nominally priced, easy to attain object, becomes financially valuable because of the artist’s intercession and after scholar’s and other commentators ascribe to it an iconic status and aesthetic ‘value’. Thereafter, the market, in its insatiable desire for the iconic, attributes a financial value to it. However, the object itself seems to be questioning precisely the attribution of financial value to something that is ‘valueless’ – an everyday urinal no less. To the extent that aesthetic value questions systems of commodification and the demands of an art market that is primarily the product of a capitalist system of financial investment and gain, it is still – as I noted above – subject to such systems. The art market will always, after a period of professional consideration from various commentators and interested parties, investment by gallery owners in artists, and against the unpredictable vagaries of trends and changing tastes, attribute an economic value to the art object. It is all the more ironic that when Duchamp showed his readymades to his contemporaries, in an attempt to refute aesthetic ‘beauty’, they readily attached a degree of beauty to them. ‘I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge’, Duchamp noted, ‘and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty’.⁶

The situation is, of course, more complex than I am letting on here and a more immediate example of aesthetic and financial ‘value’ coming into conflict can be found in the purchase of Carl Andre’s *Equivalent VIII*, 1966, by the Tate in 1972. I am aware that I

⁵ Marcel Duchamp, cited in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971; orig. publ. 1969), p. 48.

⁶ Duchamp, in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1965: pp. 207-208.

am making something of a historical, if not ahistorical, leap at this juncture; and that needs quantifying. In noting Duchamp's contribution to contemporary art, the emphasis on idea rather than form, it should be also observed that much contemporary output still relies upon the material uniqueness of an artwork. This is obviously the case when we look at contemporary painting. It is difficult to imagine anyone being able, in a manner other than the expression of an ironic – and perhaps one-liner – take on originality, to perfectly reproduce, say, an Anselm Kiefer, or a Gerhard Richter abstract painting, or a Peter Doig for that matter.⁷ So despite Duchamp's conceptual gambit, art to this day is still an object-based preoccupation; and therefore aesthetics, in a broad context, is still concerned with formal issues.⁸ Which brings us back to Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII*, a work that has garnered much by way of opprobrium and prompted the London-based *Daily Mirror* to publish an image of the work with the headline 'What a Load of Rubbish' when news of its purchase was made public. The source of subsequent public obloquy since its display at the Tate, *Equivalent VIII* consists of 120 firebricks arranged neatly, two high, six across, and ten in length. They are visually 'minimalist' insofar as there is very little to see here; very little, in fine, to find visual refuge in. And that can be a source of intimidation for someone either not ready to engage with this work, or merely unable to engage with it. For a work that is now over 40 years old, it is still a source of disbelief (as it is no doubt to the Tate) that it attracts such bemusement, if not downright hostility, when first encountered. To fully explain why, we must return to the issue of aesthetics, specifically the aesthetic employed by Andre and other minimalists when it came to making their work, and how it challenged the idea (or should that be ideal) of the financial value inherent in a work of art.

Firstly, Minimalism, like Duchamp's 'readymades', radically questions not only what art can be, but also what it can be constituted from. Andre's *Equivalent VIII* resembles not so much sculpture as it does the plinth upon which a sculpture would be traditionally placed.⁹ In this respect, the work can be seen, to some extent at least, as a riposte to the

⁷ Not that this has not stopped artists from 'reproducing' other artist's work. Mike Bildo, for one, makes perfect copies of iconic paintings by artists such as Jackson Pollock and signs them. Interestingly, and whilst Jackson Pollock's actual painting remained unsold in the Sotheby's May auction in New York, a Mike Bildo reproduction of a Jackson Pollock did sell.

⁸ On this note, Barnett Newman, perhaps missing the point, was to argue that 'Marcel Duchamp tried to destroy art by pointing to the fountain, and we now have museums that show screwdrivers and automobiles and paintings. [The museums] have accepted this aesthetic position that there's no way of knowing what is what'. Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. by John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990), p.247. .

⁹ Andre, despite the apparently radical formal aspect of his work, consistently refers to himself as a sculptor and his work as sculpture.

‘retinal’ and the perceived emotivism and artistic hubris of Abstract Expressionism.¹⁰ Minimalism, somewhat paradoxically, discloses the individual’s relationship to the artwork to be nothing other than aesthetic in its import and impact. (And it should be observed that *Equivalent VIII* is an object capable of being perceived by the senses and is therefore aesthetic in the most traditional sense of the word *aistheton*: that which is capable of being apprehended by the senses). Further characteristics include an extreme simplicity of form and a literal approach to the art object; an ambition to explore essential elements of form and structure rather than gesture; and an acute awareness of the object’s positioning in its spatio-temporal environment. All three of these aesthetic features are further complimented and yet partially contradicted by an apparent absence of intuitive decision-making in the production of the art object; a repudiation of illusion; and, perhaps most notably, a disavowal of the artist’s presence as a ‘signature’ or craftsman. The industrial nature of the work is further exploited in the use of non-traditional materials such as Perspex, steel, glass, and welded iron.¹¹ These are not only inexpensive materials, they are void of apparent aesthetic merit in the traditional sense of the term. The artist, in a tradition that can be traced back to Constructivism, can be considered here in terms of being an artist cum engineer; and that does not fit with neatly the *art pour le art* aesthetic of unique genius and that attached itself to, amongst others, Jackson Pollock.

Minimalism challenged and toppled some of the most cherished conventions about what art was and what it could be made from, not least the ideal of the artist as craftsman. And yet, in its simplicity of form, the work discloses a concomitant retreat into a pure aesthetics of form, structure, and surface. Despite the apparent lack of an aesthetic in the traditional sense, *Equivalent VIII* has no meaning outside of its spatio-temporal context – its *place* in the world – wherein which we view it and therefore respond to it on an aesthetic level. This is to observe a shift away from a concern with spatiality *within* the confines of a work – a ‘retinal’ concern, to recall Duchamp’s argument with art of his age

¹⁰ The reaction to Abstract Expressionism was not solely a sculptural concern and is perhaps best located in works such as Barnett Newman’s monumental *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), and, later in works such as Frank Stella’s *Six Mile Bottom* (1960). In Stella’s work periphery and lines correspond and the pattern is largely deduced from the actual shape of the canvas. The clarification of thought and process could be seen in terms of an automatic response to the actual process of painting.

¹¹ In the context of industrialism and mass-production, it is of interest to note that one of the influences on Carl Andre, the Romanian artist Constantin Brancusi, once had one of his works impounded for its likeness to a propeller. *Bird in Space*, 1923, a 4 ¼ foot-tall piece of bronze with a tapering bulge along its length, had been accompanied to New York by Marcel Duchamp for a show at the Brummer Gallery in 1926. The work failed to live up to the aesthetic standards of New York’s custom official, who failed to see a likeness to a bird in the piece and imposed *ad valorem* a \$240 tariff for manufactured objects of metal, which was approximately 40 % of the sale price.

– to a phenomenological concern with the work as it existed *within* space. The aesthetic experience of the work *is* its value; and its financial value cannot be attributed to the cost of its materials or their uniqueness as objects in their own right. It is significant that a considerable amount of early minimalist work was literally disposed of after the run of a show. *Equivalent VIII* does not, moreover, have an inherent un-reproducibility like, say, a painting. The work has been re-made by Andre himself using different materials but closely following the form of the original. Andre's fire bricks do not, likewise, cost that much by way of materials – and, in that age-old and tiresome cavil, anyone *could* indeed have made the work. But no one did make such work; until, that is, Carl Andre came along. And yet, *Equivalent VIII*, like *Fountain* before it, would be expensive on the open market – and the Tate, if it could indeed sell work, would see a handsome return on this particularly iconic piece of work.¹² To observe as much is to problematise our earlier assertion about the dematerialization of the art object and the ascendancy of the concept: despite suggesting above that the object becomes less and less important, in light of the idea that lies behind it, we could conversely argue that the economics of the art market attributes financial value to that which, as an object, has little or no inherent value; thus further fetishising, despite the aesthetic move away from, the object as the locus of 'value'.

This notion can be extrapolated onto the similar problem of reproducibility: to perfectly reproduce a painting by, say Anselm Kiefer, would be a difficult task when put beside the reproducing of, say, Andre's *Equivalent VIII*. However, Andre's work, and those of his erstwhile peers such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, would appear to invite reproducibility in the very objects they produce. It is this affirmation of modularity, uniformity, and an inherent reproducibility in the work of an artist such as Andre – or Judd and Morris, for that matter – that goes some way to disclosing how closely the work mimicked the very means of mass-production, and comparative devaluation, of consumer objects *per se*: the more an item is (re)produced, that is to note, the cheaper it becomes. Another of Andre's peer's, Dan Flavin, consistently employed that most emblematic signifier of industrial reproducibility: namely, commercially available fluorescent light fixtures of the sort that lit many factory floors from the 1940s onwards. There are two broad and related ideas that need to be addressed here if we are to further define the distinction between aesthetic and financial value: the first involves the fact that reproducibility is an endemic part of our own culture and, to gloss Walter Benjamin's

¹² In an interview, and when pressed about the fact that his 'ready-mades' ultimately became as fetishised in a market context as any other work, retinal or not, Duchamp replied that it was 'an absolute contradiction, but that is what is enjoyable, isn't it? See "Marcel Duchamp Talking about Readymades", interview by Phillippe Collin, (21 June 1967), in *Marcel Duchamp* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002), pp. 37-40 (p.39).

insights, the work of art no longer exists in a pre-industrial landscape like that of the mid-19th century; on the contrary, it lives in an age of mechanical (and latterly digital) reproduction. Secondly, around the time of Minimalism, art as a practice enters a period that is broadly defined in terms of its ‘conceptualism’, a movement that eschewed both the aesthetic and the object in favour of ideas – which returns us, as with all discussions of contemporary art, to Duchamp and his ‘readymades’. The progenitor of video art, Nam June Paik, was to turn to video itself, that most transferable, mediated and reproducible of modern media, so as to go *beyond* the artistic strategem that Duchamp set into play in the 1920s. In an interview, the artist noted, ‘Marcel Duchamp has already done everything there is to do – except video [...] only through video art can we get ahead of Marcel Duchamp’.¹³ Add to this, the impermanence associated with performance art and one-off installations and we get closer to the original point: artistic practice and financial worth *cannot* be answerable to the same ideals of value inasmuch as aesthetic and economic value are of necessity two distinct entities. In fact, aesthetic ‘value’ would increasingly appear to be questioning the investment of financial ‘value’ in its practice; whilst financial value increasingly conforms to critical (aesthetic) consensus as to what qualifies as an exceptional, and therefore expensive, work of art.

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To the extent that formal developments in contemporary art have often generated a degree of bafflement, if not outright hostility, on behalf of the majority of viewers (performance and installation art come to mind here), contemporary artworks which draw upon collaboration have tended to compound the puzzlement with which contemporary art practices are often greeted. Sol LeWitt, for example, long engaged a practice whereby he would literally draft careful instructions for an artwork on a sheet of A4 and then forward it to the relevant individual or institution for them to carry out, to the letter, and therefore ‘make’ the work themselves. Long seen as a pioneer of Conceptualism, which finds its intellectual underpinnings in Duchamp, LeWitt was a believer that the idea preceded the artwork and was the privileged bearer of ‘value’. Many of his wall drawings existed only for the duration of the show he happened to be in and were subsequently painted over – a practice that effectively usurps the primacy, if not meaning, of ‘object’ itself. Again, this transience would appear to be at odds with financial value, but is nonetheless key to understanding the aesthetic value of the work. However, the financial demands of commodity display and value will always be at odds with this and LeWitt’s

¹³ Nam June Paik in interview with Irmeline Lebeer, in: *Chroniques de l’art vivant*, no. 55 (February 1974), p. 35.

work, like Duchamp's and Andre's, has a given financial value attached to it – an institution pays a fixed sum of money for the 'right' to reproduce LeWitt's work – regardless of the fact that it exists only as an idea until it is made manifest by the individual or institution who purchases it. We arrive here at something of an *impasse* between aesthetic and financial value: contemporary aesthetics, post-Duchamp, would appear to subjugate the object – the privileged bearer of financial value – to the idea; the latter an immaterial and therefore difficult-to-categorise 'value' in financial terms. And yet the art market will, of necessity, always find a way to commodify – even if it means commodifying that most abstract of phenomena: an idea.

More recent developments in contemporary aesthetics go some way to revealing the extent to which art questions the commodity-based environment in which a work must, of necessity, exist. Throughout the work of Cuban-born American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, we find both a concern with transience and an aesthetic that owes much to minimalist and post-minimalist aesthetics in its reproducibility and its inexpensive materiality. Gonzalez-Torres' work is both complex and consistently relevant (he was only the second artist to be posthumously chosen to represent his country at the Venice Biennial in 2007 – the other being Gordon Matta Clark in 1982) and in this respect it is difficult to offer an overview of it without doing it an injustice. However, and in light of my above discussion, I want to examine one work here, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, that encapsulates many of his ideas if not formal concerns. The work is formally simple, consisting as it does of a mound of brightly coloured sweets is squeezed into a corner. The gallery-goer is generously encouraged to take some of the sweets as part of the work itself; in fact, the very aesthetic of the work is only activated in that moment of participation and subtraction. The final form of this work, its completion so to speak, is its absence – its diminution *into* nothingness. Apart from exploring issues of formal dematerialization, Gonzalez-Torres's 'portrait' of his lover Ross Laycock is a lament insofar as the weight of the sweets in their original state is equal to that of his partner, who died in 1991 from an AIDS-related illness. The diminishing pile of sweets is therefore allegorical: it signifies – through absence and the deliquescence of matter itself – Laycock's body and the disease he suffered from. However, the mound of sweets is ultimately replenishable insofar as in each reincarnation in a gallery or public space the work resassumes its 175 pound weight and the process resumes all over again.

Gonzalez-Torres' work explores several ideas, some public, others intimate; however, he also examined an aesthetics of transience that is at odds with the financial demands on the permanence of the object itself. Impermanence, to a certain degree, questions the

financial demands placed upon the object as privileged bearer of economic value. Nonetheless, Gonzalez-Torres' work still carries a financial worth, despite its post-minimalist play on the cheapness of materials, uniformity, reproducibility, inclusiveness, participation, and availability. What is more, his work is a precursor to what has been variously described as 'relational aesthetics', a contemporary art form that draws upon the inter-relations between individuals rather than substantive objects. The term was first used by Nicolas Bourriaud in the mid-90s and was later popularized in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), which has attracted much by way of both criticism and support. Stemming from essays published from 1995 onwards in *Documents sur l'art* – a journal jointly edited by Bourriaud and Eric Troncy – and in part from the 1996 show 'Traffic', curated by Bourriaud for CAPC Bordeaux, *Relational Aesthetics* was first published in France in 1998 before being published in English in 2002. For a relatively short series of essays the book has attracted a considerable amount of interest; a consequence, no doubt, of Bourriaud's rather grand claim that he has not only isolated a new aesthetic 'movement' in contemporary art (albeit one that is formally diverse and based upon loose rather than close associations), but also a critical language within which to discuss this development.

In a broad sense, relational art, for Bourriaud, engages in a form of practicable social interactiveness that co-opts collaboration, participation, intervention, research-led activities and community-based projects into both the form and content of the work. The emergence of these new formal strategies implies, in turn, that the 'criteria of aesthetic judgment' be yet again rearticulated. More specifically, relational art represents a branch of artistic practice that is largely concerned with producing and reflecting upon the inter-relations *between* people and the extent to which such relations – or communicative acts – need to be considered as an aesthetic form. Focusing on the modes of sociability and socialisation that issue forth from relational art practices, Bourriaud put forward *Relational Aesthetics* not so much as a 'theory of art [but as] a theory of form'; or, more precisely, a theory of formations.¹⁴ The artwork in this discourse is 'presented as a *social interstice* within which [...] new "life possibilities" appear to be possible'.¹⁵ Putting to one side the question of whether or not Bourriaud has indeed isolated a new movement in contemporary art, and this is indeed debateable, the point being progressed here is that aesthetics, in terms of form, has been reconceptualised here into a series of

¹⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), 2002, p.19.

¹⁵ Bourriaud, *ibid.* p. 45. For Bourriaud, the litany of artists who utilise relational art practices, and thus enhance the relational spheres within which they operate, is extensive and includes *inter alia* Philippe Parreno, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Pierre Huyghe.

dematerialized formations that engage architecture, performing arts, video, film, sound, participation, intervention, research-led activities, and community-based projects.¹⁶

In 1992, one of the progenitors of relational aesthetics, the Argentinian-born, New York based artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, produced *Untitled 1992 (Free)*, an installation that involved him clearing the office space in the 303 gallery in New York and installing a make-shift kitchen where he cooked Thai curry for anyone who turned up. Subsequently, in 1999, Tiravanija reconstructed a replica of his apartment in the Gavin Brown Gallery. Being a fully working model of an apartment, it was open 24 hours a day and gallery-goers were encouraged to live and eat there. Whilst this may seem to be a form of ersatz community service, the artist as social worker if you will, Tiravanija's work has been on the forefront of 'relational aesthetics' – the latter a key development in contemporary art today. What is clear, moreover, is that relational aesthetics and its practioneers, whilst not escaping systems of commodification, offer in their practice an increasingly attenuated version of what constitutes financial value in contemporary art. Can we, for example, judge an art practice in terms of financial value if all it does is generate opportunities for dialogue and social interaction? Furthermore, can an artist cooking for his friends be considered in any traditional sense as having a financial value? I ask these question in the spirit of enquiry and do not necessarily have definitive answers; however, and to reiterate my earlier point, it would appear that the most recent developments in aesthetics, as did the conceptual gambit proposed by Duchamp in the early part of the twentieth century, still question and to some degree interrogate the attribution of financial value to contemporary aesthetic practice.

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The nature of disputes and controversies surrounding contemporary art can be located in the simple fact that the actual form certain ideas take has diversified and modified according to need and trends. The criteria and modes of criticism used to interpret art as a

¹⁶ Whilst collaborative practices may be a source of puzzlement to many (a fact that might be summed up in the observation that there is not that much to actually look at when it comes to collaborative artworks), it is in itself not that radical in its concept or practice. The influential group Fluxus – which counted amongst its numbers *the* key post-war European artist Joseph Beuys – could be seen as precursors to such activities; as could some of the social events engineered by Andy Warhol and other pop artists in the 1960s. We could add to this the manifold events staged by artists associated with Situationism and Dadaism. I have examined Bourriaud's thesis elsewhere. See Anthony Downey, 'The Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics', *Third Text*, vol. 21, no.3.(May, 2007) pp. 267-275.

practice has also changed – so much so that to the casual observer it can represent yet another level of obfuscation. To note as much is to observe a truism: the idea of a universalist aesthetic point of reference, or even the notion of aesthetics as a nominal interpretive baseline, has been discursively displaced by political, social, historical, identitarian, and theoretical interventions. These developments, it should be noted, were both necessary and instructive insofar as aesthetic theory was largely an ideologically-skewed series of value judgments that maintained a hierarchy of interpretive authority. And yet aesthetics as a topic, far from fading into a minor role, has become something of a notional cornerstone in recent deliberations on contemporary art.¹⁷ However, none of this is even partially addressed without observing the shifts in the institutional contexts within which contemporary is being produced, displayed and disseminated. In albeit succinct rather than explicative terms, this could encompass a discussion of, for example, the evolving professionalization of art schools and artists as practitioners; the exponential growth of the commercial gallery on both sides of the Atlantic (and the incipient privatization of public galleries); the role of dealers and collectors in determining aesthetic and financial value (not to mention auction houses); the changing nature of the museum in contemporary culture; the role of art funds in buying art and the ensuing privatization of what was a relatively informal network of art-related occupations that is evidenced in the emergence of so-called ‘art-consultants’; the politicization of cultural production and the dissemination of art in the last two decades; and, finally, the emergence of new loci for the exhibiting (and buying) of art, not least the department store and internet. All of which sees contemporary art practices increasingly professionalized – which is not a bad thing in and of itself – to the point where they follow a business-like level of commodification and systems of production. The issue here involves the extent to which aesthetic value is being compromised by the increasingly commodified nature of our public institutions and the rampant

¹⁷ The subject of aesthetics and art criticism has been explored in Suzanne Perling Hudson’s, ‘Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism’, *October*, no 104, 2003, pp 115–130. More recently, *Art Monthly* undertook a lengthy discussion of aesthetics throughout 2004 and early 2005. See J.J. Charlesworth’s ‘Art and Beauty’, *Art Monthly*, no 279, 2004. For a critique of Charlesworth, see Mark Wilsher, ‘Judgement Call’, *Art Monthly*, no 280, 2004. For a critique of both Charlesworth and Wilsher, see Sarah James’s insightful overview, ‘The Ethics of Aesthetics’, *Art Monthly*, no 284, 2005. Elsewhere, as noted by James, the subject of aesthetics has produced a number of more far-reaching debates, including Dave Beech and John Roberts’, *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso, London, 2002; and Isobel Armstrong’s *Radical Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000. In the context of philosophical enquiry, the recent translation of Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London, 2004, has further developed enquiry into the apparent opposition to be had between the terms ‘politics’ and ‘aesthetics’; whilst Alain Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2005, has promisingly sought to subject philosophy, through the discourse of aesthetics, to the ‘truth-event’ of art itself. (Briefly, the ‘inaesthetic’ is defined by Badiou as ‘a relation of philosophy to art which, maintaining that art is itself a producer of truths, makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy’. Badiou, op cit, p. 10).

commercialization of art as a component of the cultural industry. Which refers us back to our earlier point: aesthetics, post-Duchamp, has to some extent developed as a critique of the financial value attached to the object. Whilst contemporary art cannot necessarily escape the ambit of the market and the demands of economic systems, it can at the very least offer a critique of those demands in the aesthetic form it adopts and adapts. And the stakes could not be much higher. In a milieu where both political and cultural arenas seem increasingly compromised in the face of global capital and the exigencies of the market-place it would appear that aesthetics (specifically, the inter-disciplinarity of contemporary art practices) is being ever more called upon to provide us with insights into politics, mass culture, and the sociopolitics of financial value. At this point, and by way qualification after the event, it would be perhaps timely for me to rearticulate my one-time answer to my original questioner, albeit with a shift in emphasis: in an era of neo-liberal globalization, where the sinuous channels of commodification seem to know no bounds and the public/private sphere is being incrementally elided by corporations bent on commodifying our inner most desires, aesthetics can – perhaps to a limited but nonetheless necessary extent – offer not only a critique but a way of rethinking the very idea of financial value.

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Author's Notes

Anthony Downey is the Programme Director on the M.A. in Contemporary Art, Sotheby's Institute of Art, London. He is a London correspondent for *Flash Art* and a regular contributor to *Third Text*. He has published essays, criticism and interviews in *BOMB Magazine (New York)*, *New York Arts Magazine*, *Wasafiri*, *Next Level*, *Art Review*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Pluk*, *Untitled*, *Bridge Magazine (Chicago)*, *Contemporary*, *Circa*, *Art and Architecture Journal*, *Contemporary Visual Arts*, and *Upstart*. He is currently researching a book on Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics.