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Thesis Writing

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MFA Thesis Paper

When I came to New York two years ago, almost fresh out of college, my idea of my place as a future artist was still very different from what it is now. I had a vague idea of working with galleries and having shows and selling work, yet I still hardly thought of what I would make as a product. Therefore it is understandable that the first time I was in an auction house, it was a shock for me to see the work I learned about in textbooks and art history lectures with a price tag next to it.

I was used to seeing a price list for works in galleries, but somehow the difference between that and having an amount of money marked right next to the work made a whole world of difference to me. That small difference forced me to see artwork as a very pragmatic part of an economic model instead of an ethereal visualizations of ideas and sensibilities; at that moment it almost felt like it confirmed one of my worse fears – that what I went to school for, was going to spend my life working for, was no more than a highbrow entertainment for people who can afford it. Suddenly all those capitalist art world criticisms I had to read (and subconsciously used to consider the overly simplistic product of another era), all made sense to me in a way it never really had before.

There have been a lot of discussions about how this blatantly commercial role of art could be changed, especially involving the Internet. One of the arguments is that since artworks are mostly known through their printed and digitalized reproduction these days, the original

pieces are not important anymore. Many artists who use the Internet as their main or sole medium agree that the relevance of the original artwork is on the decline, and some even favor this change, since an easily reproduced and redistributed “.TIFF” image is a much less marketable and precious object than a painting or a sculpture. Getting rid of the physical art object is seen as the solution that will compel art to be more democratic and less of an elitist plaything.

While I thought that it was a little premature to announce the death of the physical artwork, it is a factor that must be considered. It is also my view that the market will find ways to make Internet art profitable as well, sooner or later (I lean toward sooner). One noted example of this is the Santa Barbara based artist Petra Cortright. In 2011, Cortright collaborated with Ilia Ovechkin to create *Video Catalog*, which valued pieces from her 2007 video series *vvebcam* by its views on YouTube.

Cortright’s collaboration with Ovechkin is more of a commentary on the value of work in the digital age than a creative way to make money with her art, but such commentary exists precisely because there are a lot of people, from every level of the art world, who sell or attempt to sell their work online. Those transactions are posted on many different venues, from lowbrow spaces such as *eBay* and *Amazon*, niche sites such as *DeviantArt* and *Etsy*, to fine art sites (sort of) such as *artnet* and *Artsy*. Established, physical venues like prominent galleries and auction houses also have increasingly conspicuous online presences.

Still, selling work online is hardly a mainstream method of distribution in the art world at this moment. That is partly because art is most relevant when it generates discussions, creates forums and communities and impacts the larger society. The subtle and complicated rituals of gallery openings, museum functions, auction previews, studio visits etc., the characters

involved in those rituals (artists, curators, gallerists, critics, collectors), and most importantly, the conversations that occurred during these events and between these people, is what gives art its cultural importance. It could be argued that those rituals are outdated, elitist or wasteful, but in the current system, they can give meaning to art the way a simple online transaction certainly can not. This reason, and the fact digital documentations of art could never have the impact of the real thing, could probably explain why the selling of art is not yet mostly happening online, like the selling of other objects.

But nonetheless, giant online distributors are not going to give up on this last, unconquered frontier. *Amazon* and *Ebay* have created a specialized section for selling fine art, and *Amazon* is even working with actual, supposedly established galleries. I would have guessed that many gallerists would resist selling art on websites that also sell iPhone chargers, but there are others (possibly of lesser importance) who will work with *Amazon* if it means that their businesses will survive. Since *Amazon* has already launched their online art section, there must have been enough galleries that are in cooperation with them to make this section functional. But the way art is displayed, discussed and created will have to fundamentally change for such websites to ever be legitimate venues for art deals.

Artists, curators and gallerists are not listed amongst the jobs that would be replaced by robots in the recent *Bloomberg* article “Your Job Taught to Machines Puts Half U.S. Work at Risk” by Aki Ito. This article cited the director of the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory Andrew Ng: “There will always be work for people who can synthesize information, think critically, and be flexible in how they act in different situations,” said Ng, “(but) the jobs of yesterday won’t be the same as the jobs of tomorrow. (Ito 1)” It is probably one of the most difficult jobs to replace, considering the amount of independent thinking, personal sensibilities

and creativity involved in such careers. But online art auctions sites are trying to do exactly that, and such attempts have created quite a few awkward moments. I found those moments particularly interesting and started working on this project "Sell It Yourself" in 2013.

For this project, I took pixelated photos of renowned artworks in an auction preview with my phone, and then put my low-quality digital image files up for auction on eBay for 99 cents per group (I will email the images to the buyer). It was originally a simple exercise to explore where the real value of the artwork lay (in the image/concept of the artwork, the actual physical object of the art work, or the "right" to the work), and how the popularization of the Internet changed that.

I showed the listings in critiques as an afterthought. But to my surprise, I encountered many questions about how I would display this work in a gallery, when I never thought works in this media/genre should be in a gallery, even though technically I thought of my gesture as art. This discrepancy of expectations led me to reflect upon the different roles of contemporary art and artists, and what makes work "legitimate." Since I spend most of my time discussing art in an academic environment, I became surprised when confronted with concerns of the marketability of art objects, and even more surprised when I realized that sometimes art objects are worth more merely because they fit on a living room wall more easily.

As a parody of how one can crudely and blatantly commodify an unsellable work, I took screencaps of the online auction listings' layout, and made screen prints and drawings (which look like screen prints) out of them. I will actively try to sell the prints, drawings, screencaps, as well as the rights to the listings themselves on different types of online and ground venues. Then I will document the reception to my attempts (in the forms of email exchanges, website screencaps, photos, videos...etc) whether they were accepted or rejected by the said

venues, how/what/for how much different works were sold for. Most importantly, I want to pay attention to how differently the more “handmade” pieces and the original listings are received, since those pieces have no actual difference in content, but are very different in terms of how “art-like” they are.

I abandoned my earlier plan to create my own auction website for these pieces, since then this project would only exist as a gesture/relic of what I think qualifies as art at the current moment, not an actual investigation of the subject. The point of this project should be the results of my interaction with actual, functioning art audiences/venues. The details of what I discover in this process would lead to further experimentation.

One of these details is the "related item" sections most online retailers include. At the times I made the listings, eBay did not have a category for my “product,” so in the lists of related items they recommend for people who view the listings are often very random collections - anything from Disney posters, original "Sunday painters" pieces of snow scenes and flowers, to prints of famous artworks. This is a moment where the algorithm created to replace art related jobs has failed. Though eBay is already becoming more sophisticated in their categorization of art like products, I am nonetheless fascinated by this moment of confusion that I caught them in. In my series "Related Items" I am trying to guess and then demonstrate how eBay inferred superficial relationships between two “artworks”. In other words, those drawings/prints are my attempt to think like the machine that tried to think like people.

I have struggled with a perceived divide between creating works that have a physical body and situating my art-making premise strictly on the web. Although my work specifically calls for part of it to be sellable objects, I still wonder if internet-related work would only be relevant if it exists solely online, and if I am indulging my enjoyment of making material objects

too much. I also avoid coining my work with specific terms that are too current and popular in the art world, especially words that are thrown around so often that it feels corny and overused in any context. “Post-internet” is a prime example of such a term. But nonetheless, the article “What Is Post-Internet Art? Understanding the Revolutionary New Art Movement” by Ian Wallace in the magazine *Artspace* define the term in a way that’s so relevant to how I feel about the relationship between the web and materiality, that I cannot avoid referencing it: “Instead, in the same way that postmodern artists absorbed and adapted the strategies of modernism—fracturing the picture plane, abstraction, etc.—for a new aesthetic era, post-Internet artists have moved beyond making work dependent on the novelty of the Web to using its tools to tackle other subjects. And while earlier Net artists often made works that existed exclusively online, the post-Internet generation (many of whom have been plugged into the Web since they could walk) frequently uses digital strategies to create objects that exist in the real world. (Wallace 1)” This paragraph summarizes why I do not find it necessary to desist from physical objects.

To people who grew up around or after the 90s, the idea of the Internet is no longer cutting edge, and is as common and everyday as cars and the post office. The Internet is also not completely replacing the material world, but simply coexisting with it and changing it. To make work that contains both digital and physical elements is almost not a conscious, deliberate choice, but a natural conclusion based on the collective experience of the so-called “post-internet” generation.

Before I attended Pratt, I mostly made large-scaled drawings I considered maps of urban environments. Those drawing always involve collage elements, such as the receipts I collected from everyday life. I didn’t discriminate between found objects and traditional art-making materials because I hardly saw a point in doing so. I understand that art-making

materials always come with certain contexts and histories, but the strategies of early modernists are so much a part of our visual vocabularies now, that act of incorporating them itself is hardly worth noting; I am more interested in what particular found objects mean for the work. I used receipts for the same reasons I used watercolors, for both their visual qualities and historical associations. I believe that at this point in art history, the focus should be largely taken off of art-making materials. Painting is not irrelevant as long as artists are still making interesting and relevant paintings, and the same applies to almost all other mediums (or will eventually apply to all mediums).

Internet art is in a more tricky position, because the internet is still commonly known as a platform for free, democratic, easily accessible and uncensored material. I doubt it will remain as such for long, but I am glad to be caught in this transitional phase, since I am able to document and examine moments in this exceptionally interesting time. I may be too cynical to think that the Internet can fundamentally subvert the art market or any market, but it no doubt changes almost every aspect of how we consume – which is pretty much the same as how we live. To me, including elements of the Internet in art is merely being a faithful observer and documenter of the current moment, which has always been one of the most important functions of artists.

Although I use the element of parody in my work, I think those who view my work tend to think of me as being more aggressively critical of the art market than I really am. It is not that I don't think the art market (and the art world in general) can be absurd, because it is obvious that it can be; but I never thought of myself as someone who knew enough about the contemporary art world to have a strong, straightforward opinion of it, especially when I first came to New York for graduate school. I take the position as someone who knows nothing about

where art fits in the current cultural and economic context, and this project “Sell It Yourself” is my attempt to make sense of all of it.

The truth is, I don't think I am that much more knowledgeable about the art world now than I was when I first came to this program and started this project, and I don't know if I will ever truly resolve the questions I asked about my role as someone who makes art. I am OK with that because for that reason I do not see an end to this project in the near future. This place of confusion will continue to fuel my exploration of a subject that is enormously interesting and decidedly important.

Work Cited

Ito, Aki. "Your Job Taught to Machines Puts Half U.S. Work at Risk." *Bloomberg*. 12 March 2014.

Wallace, Ian. "What Is Post-Internet Art? Understanding the Revolutionary New Art Movement." *Artspace*. 18 March 2014.

List of Works Exhibited

1. Sell It Yourself #1
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
2. Sell It Yourself #2
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
3. Sell It Yourself #3
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
4. Sell It Yourself #4
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
5. Sell It Yourself #5
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
6. Sell It Yourself #6
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
7. Sell It Yourself #7
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
8. Sell It Yourself #8
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
9. Sell It Yourself #9
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches

10. Sell It Yourself #10
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
11. Sell It Yourself #11
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
12. Sell It Yourself #12
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
13. Sell It Yourself #13
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches
14. Sell It Yourself #14
2014
Screen print and pen on paper
19 x 25 inches