

Full Length Research Paper

Auctioning: A new way of placing good old-fashioned art

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Accepted 2 February, 2010

This article reflects on a new phenomenon in auctioning art by placing it in the perspective of the historical tradition of generating an artwork's aura through the aid of special places. Historically, special places such as churches and galleries have tended to maximize an artwork's experiential value in particular. Today, however, the intention of certain new special places such as auctions is primarily to maximize the retail value of an artwork. Damien Hirst's *Beautiful inside My Head Forever 2008* auction sale is used as a case study.

Key words: Art theory, aura, place, context, auctioning.

INTRODUCTION

Artwork's aura and context

An art object is nothing without its place. Art and value are inseparably connected, therefore their symbiosis must be established somewhere that is an artwork must obtain what Walter Benjamin has once called an "aura" (Benjamin, 1968).

An artwork's aura is intimately connected with and gained through "the fabric of tradition" (Benjamin, 1968), or properly speaking, "context." At the beginning of human civilization, this was created through the context of a cult and artworks were made special in the process of a ritual. The tradition of the cult, as Benjamin observed, was also a source of an artwork's authenticity in later times, but in the form of a secularized ritual as "the cult of beauty" and "the cult of art for art's sake" (Benjamin, 1968). However, in the nineteenth century this cult value of art was challenged by the invention of photography, which enabled what Benjamin termed "mechanical reproduction."

According to Benjamin, mechanical reproduction "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" and transforms it into just one object among others. Thereby, Benjamin concludes, the technical process of reproduction fulfils the socialist striving for "the sense of the universal equality of things" (Benjamin, 1968: 223). However, from today's perspective it is evident that Benjamin overestimated the shattering ability of mechanical reproduction. Mechanical

reproduction did not destroy the cult value of art and transform it into a socialist statement of the "masses." Instead, it has actually enriched its potential for exclusivity. This is precisely what Marcel Duchamp already showed before Benjamin by exploiting the very act of mechanical reproduction to construct authentic and elitist art. Today it is clear how much cult value his art has because his urinal has been honored as the most influential artwork of the twentieth century (in an opinion poll carried out in 2004 among five hundred experts from the British art world (BBC News, 1 December 2004).

Setting aside Benjamin's overestimation of the destructive power of mechanical reproduction, it is his basic thesis that the aura of an artwork is not something that can be found in its physical structure, but something that is gained through "contextualization," which is extremely relevant here. It is precisely this process of constituting an auratic context that enabled Duchamp to employ the act of mechanical reproduction for making cult objects such as his readymade. A readymade is not something that animates the social aim of "universal equality of things," but just the opposite. It mocks that equality by taking one of many mechanically identical things and enthrones it in "the emperor's new clothes." It forces us to see something impressive when there is nothing really to see.

This is the main problem I explore here: namely, the

proper context for an object to be seen as “the emperor’s new clothes” cannot be simply imagined, but must be socially generated. Moreover, the first step in doing just that requires “placing” it in the right “place.”

I explore this problem using two approaches. First, I presented a short historical review of special places where an artwork’s aura has been attained in history. Second, I presented the particular example of auctioning using a case study method, showing how an artwork’s aura is generated in such places today.

The power of the place

When one says that an artwork is made auratic by its context, the assumption is that there exists a special place that can properly contextualize an artwork. It is therefore really the place where an artwork is set up that originally has an aura.

It was only lately that Western art history, which was mainly preoccupied with the chronological development of art objects, fully realized the role of place in making those art objects auratic. Recently, however, I have seen this done by David Summers in his book *Real Spaces* (2003, especially the second chapter, “Places”). Summers has proposed that modern art history treat the history of art not through the concept of time periods, but through the concepts of “facture” and “place”; that is, through the perspective of being made and having a specific spatial position in the world. This special place, which Summers terms the “center” (Summers, 2003), has of course not only physical characteristics but, as Henri Lefebvre showed, social and economic characteristics as well (Lefebvre, 1991). The “center” is thus the place that is both physically emphasized and also socially sanctified. It is precisely this mutual dialectics of physical and social dimensions of the “center” that can catalyze the power to generate an artwork’s aura (Summers, 2003).

Nonetheless, the reciprocal interaction between an artwork and a place must also be noted. Namely, if there already is an object that has an aura (such as a relic), it can consecrate a place without previous importance and make it something exceptional and central— a “center” (Summers, 2003). However, this is not the focus of this article and I do not pursue this possibility here.

Historical review: Places for generating an artwork’s aura

Through history, special places of art have changed drastically. Here only the development of places from the Renaissance onwards was reviewed. Recent studies have shown that renaissance and especially Baroque painting was not intended to be what is usually understood as “tableau” or “easel painting” because it does not prioritize composition (Puttfarken, 2000). From the Baroque pers-

pective, the demand for an impressive sense of spatiality and “figural presence” (Puttfarken, 2000) manifesting the Christian idea of Christ’s “incarnation”, took precedence over the painting’s decorative structure. Thus the painting was not viewed as a window, but as a kind of stage, on which the bold spatial convincingness of the figures is of primary importance. However, this illusive effect could not be achieved if the painting were simply put in bright light on a white wall, which exposes its borders. Instead, it has to be positioned in a dimmed space, where the painting’s boundaries would somehow melt into its surroundings (Puttfarken, 2000). Therefore it is church space that is truly the proper place for such paintings.

With the need to secularize art, the demand for artwork’s self-sufficiency and its transfer to the “public sphere” also arose (Puttfarken, 2000). However, this independence also had to be gained in a special way in some special place. This was done by framing the painting into a window, producing an “easel painting.” When paintings are thus framed, they are considered armored and untouchable by their surroundings and subsequently they can be placed by the logic of *Le Salon*, where paintings were hung as though in a shopping mall, almost overlapping (Puttfarken, 2000). The “cult of beauty” was closely connected with the logic of this place, because the artwork most beautiful in its framed self-sufficiency was honored with the first prize.

Modernistic artwork then declared a new demand for place, which was realized by the “white cube.” As was shown by Brian O’Doherty (1976 a, b, c, 1986), the white walls of gallery space are not a neutral way of presenting all art, but a socially constructed place for generating a modernistic artwork. Two dimensions of the white cube as a special place must be considered. First is its physical value: from the physical point of view, clean white walls are ideal for presenting a painting not as a “horse” but as a “surface layered with colors,” as Maurice Denis (1890) put it. Because of its simplicity, a white wall is seen as quasi-neutral and supposedly indispensable for placing each painting. However, what a white wall does to a Baroque or easel painting, it actually transforms it into a modernistic one, just as framing a Baroque or modernist painting and placing it by the logic of *Le Salon* converts it into a “tableau.”

The second value of the white cube is its social one. It is this value that the readymade exploits. Readymade as invented by Duchamp totally depend on the special social status of a gallery space (otherwise an object, mechanically being just one of many, could not be made auratic). However, as I reflect in more detail later, overly blind reliance on the social power of a gallery space can lead to vulgar and perverse conclusions such as “anything goes”—something that Duchamp would hardly agree with. Yet it is precisely in this manner that the white cube is being (ab) used today. Namely, the general opinion these days holds that, if a gallery space is considered a sacred place intended only for art, than anything that is placed there cannot be anything but art. Or as some

artists, such as Gavin Turk, put it: I suppose all art is context-specific. If you go back out into the everyday context, a sweet wrapping is a sweet wrapping and probably should be put in the right place. There's a strange thing that happens when you put something into a gallery, which transforms the thing into a picture of itself (Vasagar, 2001)

The auction: The new place?

Reviewing places for generating artwork's aura, today the temptation to use the social value of a white cube to make art of just anything is being exploited in an interesting way. This is being done through the phenomenon of "auctioning." The physical manner of presenting an artwork in an auction house is not distinguished from that in a white cube. However, the social conversion that takes place during auctioning is quite extreme in comparison to the traditional gallery. This is shown below using a case-study.

Case study: Damien Hirst's sale

In 2008 Hirst again hit number one on the "Power 100" of Art Review magazine as being the most influential person of the 2008 art world (Coburn et al., 2008). What did he do to deserve this?

On 15 and 16 September 2008 he organized two auction sales called *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* of his latest art production at Sotheby's (Sotheby, 2008). For the layman this would hardly make an eyebrow twitch, but an art world expert recognizes this as something immense. What was so huge about it?

Instead of showing his recent artwork in a gallery and selling it through dealers, which would probably be quite time consuming, Hirst went straight to the auction house and put his work on sale. Moreover, it was not just a few works he wanted to sell, but loads of them, 220 altogether and he sold them all in just two days, for a total of GBP 111,464,800. When reviewing this mass of works, it is fascinating to realize that they are actually old. Of course they were produced in 2008, but they are something one would already expect from Hirst. It is obvious that Hirst could not be lauded only on this basis.

Analyzing the top ten of the "Power 100," one cannot overlook the fact that there are only two artists: Hirst as first and Jasper Johns as ninth (Coburn et al., 2008). All the others are art dealers or art curators. The reason for this is obviously the fact that the four criteria, a genuine influence over the production of art, influence on an international scale, financial clout and activity within the last twelve months (Coburn et al., 2008) by which art world "power" is measured by Art Review magazine do not include criteria generally considered immeasurable (that is, artistic criteria), but only criteria that can detect

profit and notoriety.

It is then obvious that Hirst's company Science has actually not hit the art world's jackpot for promoting a kind of artistic revolution, but only because (as the people at Art Review also confirmed) it has generated the most fame and squeezed the most fortune out of the current profit-oriented art world situation: "Yet Hirst's advance towards artist-as-brand isn't really about revolutionizing the art world—it's about having your cake and eating it" (Coburn et al., 2008). So Science has done what in our time is usually achieved by those that possess the money (businessmen) and have authority over the institutions (curators). These days, art dealers and "gallerists" usually have the "muscle" to raise the value of an artist and to impart an aura to his artworks that only a moment before were worthless. What Science has done is precisely this—however, not to someone else's work, but to Hirst's own. It did this by using auctioning mechanisms.

Of course, auctioning itself is not enough, but has to take place in a proper auction "center" like Sotheby's. Moreover, to get into an auction house of this reputation, one has to be (in) famous already. Therefore you cannot make yourself celebrated by auctioning from nothing, but you already have to have fame and fortune to gain yourself even more power and wealth by auctioning at a special place. Namely, having an auction at Sotheby's is like having a one-man exhibition at MoMA. For both, you already have to be a star and both can turn you into a superstar. However, there is an important difference between the logic of perception of artworks in the gallery and in the auction house and I think it is this difference Hirst is making use of: people go to auction houses with the intent of "wrestling" for an object on the site by maximizing its value (they concern themselves later with whether they will also enjoy that object) and people mainly go to galleries only to enjoy (and to consider later whether something is also worth buying).

DISCUSSION: The natural evolution?

Duchamp once made an artwork of an everyday object by putting it into the white cube; however, he did not exploit this intelligent act to make art of just anything and to sell everything as art, although that would have been quite possible. On the contrary, a limited number of Duchamp's readymade, of which most were never realized or are lost and the fact that Duchamp was never overly eager to exhibit them, suggest that he intended them as sort of "personal experiment." He therefore obviously sought to avoid redundancy, which could be misread as "anything goes" (Girst, 2003). However, as Thomas Girst observes, it is precisely in this way that Duchamp is being (ab) used by the contemporary art world: From the immediate post-war period until today, Duchamp's readymade have been all too often taken as carte blanche for "anything goes," mere nihilistic or icono-

clastic gestures based on the belief that, generated by the choice of the artist, it is only the changing of the context (that is, a urinal at a plumbing-fixture store vs. *Fountain* at a gallery) through which an ordinary object is transformed into a work of art (Girst, 2003).

In a way, Hirst exploits this “anything goes” possibility to the merchandising extreme because he has managed to sell his mass production of predictable works as though they were some kind of lost treasure. If Duchamp’s act can be seen as ironic and noble at the same time (for it was meant purely as a benevolent action of building on art through its self-reflection), in this context Hirst’s auctioning must be seen as a sort of perversion because it is not meant as beneficent for art itself, but is evidently intended merely for the momentary maximization of profit. Namely, if Duchamp made something from nothing for art’s own sake, it is Hirst that uses auctioning to maximize nothing to everything for his own sake only. Although Hirst claims that auctioning is “the most democratic way of selling art” (BBC News, 19 June 2008), it is really the most efficient and the most profitable way of doing so. However, the way the world is turning these days, he must be right when he says that “it feels like a natural evolution for contemporary art” (BBC News, 19 June 2008).

This thought directs me to the following concluding assessment. If, in the past, special places such as churches and galleries tended above all to maximize the artwork’s experiential value, the way an artwork should be enjoyed and perceptually “consumed” and thus not everything could be an artwork, today the intention of new special places like auctions is primarily to maximize the retail value of an artwork, so an artwork itself can in principle be just anything. It is obvious that such an evolution of the artwork’s aura is very much connected with the fact that Duchamp’s logic of the readymade was misinterpreted by the contemporary art world, declaring that, if everything can be made an artwork by putting it into a gallery, then “everything is an artwork” when in a gallery, a statement that John Carey credulously repeats (Carey, 2005). It should then come as no surprise when, in some stupendous cases (as happened to Damien Hirst at the 2001 show at the Eye storm Gallery in Mayfair; Vasagar, 2001), gallery cleaners throw away artworks, having mistaken them for garbage. Who is to blame? The cleaner that is too ignorant to know the importance of such an artwork, or perhaps the artist that foolishly thought that rubbish can be made into something of real importance just by putting it into some special place? Nebulous as this may seem, when such relativistic perception of an artwork’s aura is combined with the aggressive logic of temporary merchandising, the result is precisely what Hirst has done by auctioning: he did not simply claim that everything is art, but he also persuaded people to frantically struggle to buy everything he claimed was art.

This shows that today the aura of an artwork is more

than ever before bonded with processes of violent momentary merchandising. Hirst’s first place on the “Power 100” list was then due to his ability to exploit his fame and fortune with the help of new profitable terrain for placing his good old-fashioned art and this is precisely what auctioning is intended for.

The obvious question that comes to mind is: what could the next place in this “natural evolution” be? Trading art companies and artworks on stock markets, perhaps? Then everyone could taste the delight of sharing Damien Hirst in a truly “democratic way.”

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