



MATERIALITY AND ART

04

'The Death and the Girl,' 2005, by Anna Stangl; essay by Anna Kusché.

On Pricing in the Art Market and the Hierarchy of Materials

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The following article discusses the pricing of artwork in relation to the material used, i.e. the way in which the very materiality of an artwork influences its value and the socially constructed and historically determined hierarchy of this valorization of different materials. But before we proceed, we shall introduce the basics of the art market and the pricing of something considered 'priceless'. Art has been historically considered as priceless, as it had the status of a miracle. An artist has often been imagined as someone who could take something ordinary and transform it into something magical. Nowadays, art is seen less as a miracle, instead, what is valorized is the introduction of something new and innovative that makes the viewer feel differently (Abbing 2002, 300).

Rules of the Art Market

In 2008, when the financial crisis peaked, Damien Hirst broke the world record for the highest price in an auction sale by a living artist. In two days, he made £111 million. This happened after he broke the record for the most expensive piece ever sold from a living artist. This record from 2007 was controversial as Damien Hirst was himself among the group of buyers. He argued that he wanted to be the master of his price (Ulrich 2002, 73). What this example brilliantly shows is that the art market and the financial market are not in any way related. So how are these ridiculously high prices possible, if the cash flow is not a factor? Art is not only valued monetarily, cultural ideas behind the work are important when it comes to pricing. This is a highly discussed topic – to put a price tag on cultural ideas is very controversial. The critics of commercialization of art argue about the influence of buyers or sponsors that could result in a customized art that has nothing to do with the unique creation of artists. Marxist art theorists are suspicious about the influence of putting a price tag on a unique work of art. Others believe that the art and the market are on opposite sides, having nothing to do with each other (Beckert & Rössel 2013, 179). To present them as opposites is not logical. For a professional artist, there is no way around the market. Artists have to earn money to be able to continue their artistic work. To do that means selling their work on the art market. In my opinion, these two live in a symbiosis, rather than being separate or antagonistic. There is no way around the valuation of one's 'priceless' work if she or he wants to sell it, but the question is how and who decides what the price tag will be.

Valorization of Art

'... until the second half of the nineteenth century, a formal control of numbers or occupational control was common in the arts. For instance, in France until the end of the seventeenth century, painters' guilds regulated sales and the types of materials used, and they also issued licenses to individual painters. Thereafter, the Académie Royale maintained a monopoly and forced all independent painters to join its organization. Moreover, it also defined the 'correct' style; this style was taught in school' (Abbing 2002, 266).



In these times of capitalism, the art market is no longer controlled by the government and its rules or laws. Nowadays, the biggest selling point is the fame of the artist, his or her brand: if the name is well known then the price is higher than that of an art piece by an unknown artist. The price of a famous artist will increase after her or his death, as then it is impossible to create more work. The quality appears to be an important influence on the price, but what means quality, especially in postmodern times, when the question can arise: is this art or rubbish? The aesthetic value of one's work seems no longer so important in the world of contemporary art. To be fair though, it is impossible to define what is beautiful and what is not. Even in the time of Raffael, this was not clear. Officially, the mimesis was the highest goal that an artist could reach but till this day Raffael is more famous than Jan van Eyck, even though his paintings are much closer to the mimesis than Raffaels (Hutter & Shusterman 2006, 171).

Pricing of Art

The price is based on the artistic value rather than on the expenses that were made for the material. Artwork should have a certain quality if it is going for sale. The problem with this is that there is no catalogue where all the criteria for quality of a work are written down. Before pricing an object, it must go through the intersubjective process (Beckert & Rössel 2013, 180). That means that every artist can make up their own prices, because the guidelines could not be more subjective. With a little bit of luck, a completely unknown artist could sell her or his work for a lot of money, they just have to find the right buyer. The great problem with having no regulation is that as high as the prices can be, as deep can they fall. Material costs and work time do not have a lot of influence on the price. Hence, the question of how expensive the materials are and how much time is put in the art does not make a difference. While they are not unimportant, they are not important in proportion to the price of the sold work. While the material costs incurred are not influential, the valuation of the material influences the price. In general, Europe and North America have the most power in the art market, and thus also decide about the valuation of the materials. In Europe, canvas has a higher value than paper. When something is painted on a canvas than we think it has to be worth more than something that is drawn on paper. We like to think that, the bigger something is, the costlier. In the study that was done by Jens Beckert and Jörg Rössel, they concluded that the price per square centimeter is dropping in relation to the size. That means that the price is rising with the size, but the rise is not exponential. Size does matter, but not in the same way as the career length of an artist matters. A lot of young artist struggle with their career at the very beginning. This is because young artists have not found themselves. Their work lacks quality: to overcome this issue some artists try to compensate it with quantity, but in general that is not helpful (Beckert & Rössel 2013, 185).

Material Value

Before talking about value, it has to be clear that value is not measured in terms of material costs. The costs of the material are not considered since the material is the part of the work that costs the least. Hirst's 'For the Love of God' is the perfect example to show the relation between the material costs and the price it fetched because the price was four times higher than the diamonds would have cost on the diamond market. It is safe to believe that the work time did not diminish the profit margin. Wolfgang Ulrich

argues that the exaggerated price was a result of two different things. Firstly, he compared it with potlatch (the word means to give away, it is a feast celebrated by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States, during which gifts are exchanged; the more precious a gift is, the higher the position of the family, who gave the gift). That means that the social capital of the buyers will be higher if they pay a higher price. The more important part is the pathos of the skull. Every person can see the value in the sparkles of the diamonds. Diamonds are considered one of the most valuable items in the world. The pathos is also represented in the title 'For the love of God', which is the phrase people are using to express their feeling about the high price. 'A wine that costs one thousand euros, creates stronger promises, than one for one hundred euros will do and one thinks with the more expensive one to be able to experience more at the same time. If someone drinks both just as fast as the other one, that the person will have a more pleasant time with the expensive wine, even if the other has a better price' (Ulrich 2012, 74).

Usage of a Material

How does an artist decide which material she or he will use? A lot of artists want their work to survive for eternity so that the value is bound to the future. This is actually a misconception. First of all, nowadays there are so many way of conservation that a vast majority of materials can survive, if not till the end of the world, at least for a far longer duration of time than ever before. The bigger threat to a piece is the garbage bin because even if something was made for eternity it does not mean that it will be here for the rest of times, a lot of the artworks are in fact thrown away (Abbing 2002, 54).

Paper

Hence, the pathos of the material is important for the pricing. A material, like diamonds, is very expensive and precious to people, that is why they would pay more money for it. Paper, on the other hand, is a material that is used on a regular basis and thus does not have the same effect. That is one reason why no one is willing to pay high prices for a drawing (Hutter & Shusterman 2006, 195). Even canvas or something in another way conspicuous is higher valued than paper, which translates into pricing. Even after the artist created her or his work on the surface, the pathos of the material is present (Abbing 2002, 35). A was to fetch a higher price for drawings, would be to put them on a canvas. A possibility that is used is glueing the paper on a canvas. In this case, the price can rise, but with the extending of the material, the original drawing on paper loses a lot of its effect. Even if the low pathos comes from the fragility, it is also the soul of the whole piece. That the colour is going to faint, does also create a certain charm and with new technology, it is possible to conserve a drawing, so that it will survive hundreds of years. These dilemmas about the value of materials were revealed to me in discussion with the Viennese artist Anna Stangl, famous for her charming drawings on paper and illustrations. She herself could experience first-hand how the material of the artwork shapes its value and perception, suggesting that there is a hierarchy of materials canvas for instance being above paper, harnessing more value and reputation.

Conclusion

The art market is a complicated place, because much of it is subjective. It has little relation to other markets or crises. Art is 'priceless' and therefore cannot be compared to

anything else. A price is made based on the fame of the artist, luck and the value of the material, it was created from. At the same time, the ridiculously high price often has nothing to do with the artist or the object, but more with questions of social prestige and social capital. That capital can only come if the bought object was indeed expensive. Material plays a significant role as well. To be precise, the value of the material, because everything is about the value when it comes to the arts. The pathos of an object is also key, as it reflects on the quality of the art work.

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