

Consigned for Auction: A User's Manual.

- Artists have frequently cultivated an ambivalent relationship with their society. Celebration is often counterbalanced by criticism, economic dependency by claims of intellectual autonomy. This ambivalence is most clearly visible in the cases of artists who have or who are attempting to expose, critique or alter the institutional foundations of their discipline and practices. Success, in such cases, can be short-lived, as radical gestures and practices are absorbed by institutions and eventually by the discipline as a whole. Ambivalence, in these cases, is not only a product of the tensions and frictions of operating along disciplinary and institutional boundaries, it is generated by the contradictions produced by institutional absorption and neutralizing conditions of display. There is also a more general form of historical ambivalence, triggered by the knowledge and 'consciousness' of radical practices when they serve as a backdrop to the art object's normal lifecycle, as in the case of its circulation within a market economy. The recent history of the contemporary art auction provides an interesting context within which to explore the evolving relationship of ambivalence between art, artists and society.
- The auction has always had a particular role in our society. It has served as a junction and clearing-house for the redistribution of cultural and natural 'things' and a medium through which they can be constantly re-evaluated.
- Auctions ensure that the landscape of material culture is systemically renewed by the circulation of objects through private and public space. In the process, they attribute collective cultural and monetary value to them through a competitive bidding process. Perhaps the auction is one of the few institutions that actively functions, on a daily basis, as a medium that brings together different spaces and times through an articulation of real and symbolic capital.
- The auction process achieves its designated socio-economic and cultural objectives through a complex multi-sensory experience nourished by desire, competition and ownership. The auction catalogue is the basic frame of reference for this experience since it sets the stage for the auction to take place.
- Each individual auction is built into its catalogue which is designed to persuade the reader that the objects listed therein are desirable - useful, unusual, historically or culturally significant, rare - and are therefore, in each case, worth owning.
- The auction catalogue is not only a basic inventory of objects to be sold on the open market, it is also a sophisticated archive of information about those objects.
- Auction catalogues exhibit a basic structure composed of six elements: A lot number, artist's name (where applicable), title and date, description of the object, a price estimate that serves as a guideline for the buyer, and a note of provenance (where applicable). These elements are accompanied by a photographic reproduction of the object to be sold (optional, but increasingly necessary). The print-based layout of these elements has varied over time but has always taken a chronological form following the lot number sequence. These are the basic elements of the auction catalogue's system/economy and they exist in different visual form within the classic auction catalogue and its

ultra-modern variants. They compose the common elementary template within which any item can be placed in any sequence—any relationship with any another item. All auction catalogues are based on the sequential (cellular) reproduction of this template. Their ‘universal’ graphic format is a product of that cellular organization.

- Like any universal graphic template designed to fulfil a common economic or bureaucratic function (cheque, business form, etc.), the auction catalogue embodies a dual identity. First, it must minimally represent the organization that it serves. Second, it must also be able to capitalize on the identity of its ‘merchandise’ in order to fulfil its immediate bureaucratic/organizational objective, which is tailored, in an auction’s case, to a final economic goal of monetary/object exchange. This operational duality transforms the auction catalogue into a refined non-site. An object is no longer considered to be site specific: it has no ‘home’ or precise cultural function since it has been separated from both in order to be sold on an open market where, ideally, equality is guaranteed by a simple mechanism: the sound of the auctioneer’s hammer confirming a final winning bid. A public or private display is its ultimate destination.
- The auction and its catalogue offer a model of the fragmentation and circulation of objects that is a reflection of an economic model where lineage and chronology are often intentionally dismantled according to the free market operations of desire and competition (bidding between interested parties). The auction catalogue is a mute testimony to this process and its petrified archive. (*See item 3 in Research area vitrine*)
- Once an object has been sold, the auction catalogue serves as a repository of information about the item. It functions, in this capacity, as an archive in relation to an object’s economic—market—value and cultural identity (origins and provenance). This information can be used to trace the history of its movement in and out of the auction economy, from private to public spaces, collection to collection. (*See item 1 in Research area vitrine.*)
- In keeping with the times, leading auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s have diversified into real estate, education, private sales and curated selling exhibitions that mimic the function of a private art gallery. Auction houses have thus adopted a tentacular multi-national corporate model in their bid to link the prestige associated with their names and activities to other social processes and categories of material culture. The same model animates their recent global expansion into previously remote or inaccessible ‘cultural’ markets as represented by Beijing, Dubai, Doha, Hong Kong, Mumbai, or Shanghai.
- Artists have sporadically exploited the auction process and catalogue. Marcel Duchamp designed an auction catalogue to accompany his sale of 80 works by Francis Picabia through the Hôtel Drouot auction house, Paris, in 1926. Damien Hirst used the same process to circumvent a traditional gallery-based art market. Hirst’s *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* exhibition/auction was held over two days at Sotheby’s, in London, in September 2008. (*See item 2 in Research area vitrine.*)
- Hirst’s appropriation of the auction in the name of a business model which redefines the artist as *business entrepreneur* and places the artist at the centre of the financial/symbolic world that the auction represents/articulates is novel, if only in the way it reveals what was always implicit in the art

world and its market economy. Hirst's strategy has exposed the invisible contract between art and money, desire and power. Hirst's 2008 Sotheby's sale confirmed the auction house's traditional if unacknowledged role of placing the exhibition and auction on an equal footing. According to this model, all artworks must be considered, first and foremost, to be merchandise.

- While some artists have used the auction process for personal gain, they have yet to exploit the mine of information archived within the covers of auction catalogues as well as the complex spatio-temporalities that they create between objects of different times and places. This is also true in the case of the new methodologies that are needed to analyse, organize and display the results of this 'ultramodern' form of archaeological site.
- Although auction catalogues have limited life spans because they are designed to function in relation to a specific event, they embody interesting epistemological characteristics that are worth investigating because of their relationship to culture and its socio-economic foundations.
- Since the auction catalogue monitors the circulation of objects between public and private spheres of social activity it has now become an important witness to the shifting relationships and transformations in the definition and function of the art object and artist and the kinds of knowledge that can be deployed in the service of those transformations.
(See item 5 in *Gallery vitrine*.)
- The auction catalogue bears witness to the process by which an object's unique embodiment of socio-cultural pedigree, economic and symbolic prestige and value has been artificially created, supported and authenticated by the *knowledge* that a catalogue deploys in relation to it. For it is by means of the auction catalogue that knowledge is officially and publicly correlated with a monetary value (whose basic measure is a printed estimate) in such a way as to officially *enrich* and give *substance* to an object's potential commodity and symbolic values. The *desire to possess* an object is thus openly encouraged through design strategies that have appropriated the tools of connoisseurship and academic knowledge (the academic or curatorial article, the interview, the use of references and citations, etc.) for the specific objective of selling works of art. (See item 15 in *Gallery vitrine*.)
- Traditionally, the auction catalogue functioned as the interface between the expert knowledge that the auction house marshalled in support of the various objects it sold and the wider population of amateur or professional collectors and dealers that might have been interested in purchasing the items presented in its pages. Often it was an internal expert cataloguer who had the task of collating information on lots to be sold. However, since the 1970s, the auction catalogue has been slowly transformed into an important nexus and *archive* of recycled or commissioned expert knowledge that has been marshalled in support, most often, of important individual artworks with the specific objective of amplifying their symbolic and economic capitals. (See item 16 in *Research area vitrine*.)
- Over the past ten years or more, auction houses have produced increasingly complex catalogues involving extensive essays, detailed biographies and interviews that have been presented by way of innovative visual layouts. Perhaps the most creative auction house in this area has been Phillips de Pury (now known as Phillips) that launched a series of thematic auctions in 2009, the first of which was titled 'Now.' The series contributed to a redefinition of the boundaries of the traditional

catalogue within its existing template by introducing different categories of objects within a common artworld frame of reference and by introducing a magazine aesthetic involving comparative images, short essays, commentaries and interviews by and with prominent artists, curators and collectors. (See item 9 in *Research area vitrine*.)

- Art institutions have rarely confronted the auction process in order to reveal its mechanisms, procedures, implicit economy and politics. One notable exception was the *Two in One* auction held under the auspices of Christie's in conjunction with the contemporary art centre Witte de With and de Appel in 2009. Artists were invited to produce works that engaged with the auction as institution and process. Their actions were nevertheless confined to this one 'gala' event. Moreover, the *Two in One* catalogue fulfilled its traditional role of providing information on each item to be auctioned, and its design was therefore based on the industry's standard template for this type of publication.
- In addition to being miniature book-based archives, auction catalogues can be designed as collectable artworks, in which case they might also operate as meta-visual works that play with their own institutional frames of reference. The 2008 Phillips de Pury *Collect this Catalogue* is an interesting example not only because of the four original prints it contained, but also because of its reflexive title. This publication functioned simultaneously as an auction catalogue, medium of distribution, exhibition site, and vehicle for an ironic, playful form of neo-/post- institutional critique (the prints were not signed, dated, or numbered). Such catalogues begin to blur the boundaries between auctions and artworks in a novel fashion by introducing a new, in between, dual function category of book. (See item 10 in *Research area vitrine*.)
- The road to the auction can begin much earlier in an artwork's history if this 'end' is built into its conception as Duchamp's 1926 auction catalogue implicitly suggested or as Louise Lawler demonstrated in 2009. Lawler's contribution, 'People who expressed interest in this work also bid on the following:' to the *Two in One* auction can be considered to be a successful solution to the problem of how to dynamically insert an analytically oriented counter-practice into the auction process as it takes place.
- Artworks that are based on auction catalogues and their archives have a dual social function. They render visible a key transitional hub in the art world's economy where it is possible to experience and perhaps acquire an artwork before it disappears into other private or public hands. They also operate in a meta-disciplinary manner because their existence begins at the point where an artwork's primary economy ends, where a basic cycle of production and consumption has been limited, in the first instance, to the studio (or production site)/gallery/museum circuit and its various offsite extensions. The auction provides a means of developing a secondary meta-circuit for an artwork's private/public circulation within a society. By hanging an auctioned-based 'meta-visual' work in a private or public space the viewer is confronted with the reproduction of a key event in the western economic life cycle of an artwork.
- All the major auction houses have constructed elaborate websites that provide a wide range of information about the auction process from consignment to electronic versions of paper-based catalogues, to post-sale services. The information on sales that is now archived on these sites can also serve as a basic frame of reference for the production of new independent artworks, and even

exhibition practices. They provide a different foundation for the production of an artwork or exhibition because of their non-linear organization, unusual design options, and ease of access.

- The *Remote Exhibition* series of email-transmitted PDFs represent an alternative to current exhibition practices. These independent mini-exhibitions are conceived as pre- and post-auction encounters, where one or more lots are chosen to be ‘experienced’ directly (during pre-auction viewing), indirectly (by way of catalogue consultation), or simply as ‘directives’ in a thought experiment. (See *Research area tables*.)
- The auction catalogue can also be used to produce ‘meta-catalogues’ like Duchamp’s 1926 Picabia catalogue or, more recently, Sean Micka’s *Negotiations* (2011), an artist’s book based on the appropriation of a 1983 Christie’s catalogue, *The Contents of Benjamin Ginsburg, Antiquary Including the Property of Cora Ginsburg*. Meta-catalogues explore various facets or possibilities that are implicit within a given catalogue or auction sale. This is especially interesting in the case of the auction of a collection or partial collection of artworks that were originally designed and produced to operate *outside* of standard art categories and institutions. Duchamp’s Picabia catalogue is an early example. Another recent and different example is provided by the sale *Selected Works from the Collection of Anton & Annick Herbert for the Benefit of the Herbert Foundation* in 2011. The auction consisted of a group of minimal, arte povera and conceptual artworks from leading late 1960s practitioners. To auction works that were produced under different historical conditions of production, display and exchange, highlights the contradictions that are produced by the multiple roles and functions of objects that circulate in different economies at different moments in their history.
- The selective recuperation of key artworks from the auction process and their transformation into meta-visual documents raises important questions about their new cultural, socio-economic and epistemological statuses and functions. Each selection, each work, embodies a different visual analysis of the auction process and catalogue, even if the works and their layouts appear to be similar. For their individual semiotics resonate differently with the specialized economies in which they circulate as auctioned object, catalogue image, or meta-visual document.

David Tomas

Consigned for Auction:

Notes toward a history of the contemporary art auction catalogue

1. July 1924. The first sale of an important collection of modern art and ethnographic artifacts, the Éluard Collection, is held at the Hôtel Drouot auction house, Paris.
2. March 1926. Marcel Duchamp's auction of eighty works by Francis Picabia is held at the Hôtel Drouot, Paris. The catalogue is designed by Duchamp. The sale marks the first use of the auction process by an artist for the sale of works by another artist. The auction catalogue is the first to be designed by an artist for a sale of works collected by that artist.
3. July 1931. The first major sale of ethnographic artifacts from Africa, America and Oceania collected by avant-garde artists and writers, the André Breton and Paul Éluard Collection, is held at the Hôtel Drouot, Paris.

4. October 1973. The first important sale of a major collection of contemporary art to draw the hostile attention of artists, *A Selection of Fifty Works from the Collection of Robert C. Scull*, is held at Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York.
5. October 1992. The sale, 'by order of the creditors,' of the contents of the Nigel Greenwood Gallery, is held by Sotheby's, London. The Nigel Greenwood Gallery is one of the most important London galleries, along with the Lisson, Situation, and Jack Wendler Galleries, supporting emerging artists in the 1970s working in the area of conceptual and related art. The creditors' sale signals an end to a particular vocationally motivated model of the London art dealer as well as serving as a barometer of the economic and aesthetic transformations in a post-1980s art world.
6. May 1994. The sale of property from the estate of John Rewald is held by Christie's, New York. The catalogue provides an insight into the collecting habits of this important art historian, while serving as an archive of the collection and of his taste.
7. October 2005. The sale of works from the collection of Liliane and Michel Durand-Dessert takes place at Sotheby's and the Galerie Liliane & Michel Durand-Dessert, Paris. It is a significant sale of predominantly post-1960s works by artists supported by this major French gallery. The catalogue not only defines the intellectual and aesthetic character of the collection, but it also defines the character of a gallery and through the sale, the 'avant-garde' predispositions of the auction house and process.
8. September 2008. The first sale of an artist's work organized by the artist himself, takes place through the auction process held at Sotheby's, London. Damien Hirst's *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* effectively circumvents the gallery economy in a spectacular fashion. The 223-lot sale sets a record for a single-artist auction.

IX. September 2009. The inauguration of the *NOW* theme series of auctions is held by Phillips de Pury (now known as Phillips). The *NOW* series promotes the sale of artworks via sophisticated catalogue design that mixes essays, interviews, artworks, photographs and design products in a spectacular and unprecedented hybridization of traditional auction categories.

10. November 2008. Phillips de Pury produce the first auction catalogue to include original works by living artists. *Collect this Catalogue* is an important example of a novel strategy to promote the auction process in an ironic and reflexive manner that pays homage to the social functions of the collector and her/his close relationship to the auction process and economy.

11. May 2009. The *Two in One* auction is produced by Christie's, Amsterdam, in conjunction with Witte de With and de Appel. This systemic collective exploration of the auction through the sale of works expressly produced to engage with its process is celebrated by the publication of a conventional catalogue that nevertheless serves to archive this important event.

12. December 2010. The first of a PDF-based series of 'Remote Exhibitions' is sent out via email. Each Remote Exhibition is designed to highlight a small group of works that can then be visited during the viewing hours preceding an auction or by way of catalogue or Internet consultation. The PDFs and their limited edition extensions serve, in their condensed meta-catalogue capacity, to raise questions about the nature and function of the auction, catalogue, collection and exhibition.

13. November 2011. The first major sale of selected works from the celebrated Anton & Annick Herbert Collection of minimal, conceptual and *arte povera* works is held at Christie's, New York. The auction represents an important attempt to create an auction-based market for these 'difficult' kinds of works.

Information versus knowledge:

Examples of catalogues designed to function as proto art historical reference works.

14. March 1926. Marcel Duchamp's sale of eighty works by Francis Picabia, Hôtel Drouot, Paris. The catalogue is designed by Duchamp. This is the first use of the auction process by an artist for the sale of works by another artist. The catalogue contains an insert written by Duchamp under the nom de plume Rose Sélavy that describes the basic stylistic evolution of the works to be sold.

15. November 1992. The sale of Andy Warhol's *Marilyn x 100* is held at Sotheby's, New York. The slim 28-page catalogue is a compact example of how to present pertinent historical/biographical information that has been organized in support of the sale of this one work. It is also an example of the production of an autonomous auction catalogue within a

larger sale that is represented by another catalogue. *Marilyn x 100* is Lot 25 in *Contemporary Art, Part I* (Sale 6363).

16. May 2007. A single work auction of Andy Warhol's *Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I)* is held at Christie's, New York. The 110-page catalogue is an excellent example of the substantial historical/biographical information that can be deployed in support of the sale of a single artwork. The resulting catalogue is transformed into a significant and sharply focused work of reference.

17. September 2009. The inauguration of the *NOW* theme series of auctions is held by Phillips de Pury (now known as Phillips). The *NOW* series promotes the sale of artworks via a sophisticated catalogue design that brings together essays, interviews, artworks, photographs and design products.

18. November 2011. The publication of the catalogue for the sale of works from the celebrated Anton & Annick Herbert Collection of minimal, conceptual and arte povera works is held at Christie's, New York. The catalogue is designed to not only promote the collection's historical significance, and hence each work's importance, but also to provide a historical frame of reference for the consolidation and selective dispersal of this important collection.

David Tomas

The exhibition, *Consigned for Auction*, was presented at Artexte from September 7 to October 26, 2013 (Part 1), and from October 31, 2013 to January 14, 2014 (Part 2)

ARTEXTE

2, Ste-Catherine Street East, room 301
Montréal (Québec) H2X 1K4

T : 514.874.0049

www.artexte.ca

info@artexte.ca