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Abstract

Contemporary art is seldom given sustained anthropological analysis despite its tantalizing potential. As a response, this essay examines the work of Thomas Kinkade to cast an oblique light on the production of value. Kinkade’s mechanically reproduced opus representing Cotswold cottages, quaint city scenes, and Disney fantasies are sold by authorized dealers in malls, along tourist strips, and online. Rather than operating as kitsch, lowbrow, or a new model for art-making, Kinkade’s overt profit motive, self-celebration, and evangelical Christianity refract political, economic, and especially aesthetic constructions that undergird contemporary markets. A bad boy of the aesthetic economy, Kinkade’s work, mostly dismissed by the established art world, nevertheless has much to say about it, and about us. Ultimately, I suggest that The Painter of Light’s success shows that aesthetic sensibility is integral to political economy, rather than epiphenomenal to it, and that we must therefore pay attention to the role of art therein.

I have been fascinated by the question of value for some time. Some kinds of art are quite valuable, at least from a monetary perspective: Picasso’s Nude, Green Leaves and Bust for example, sold on the secondary market at Christie’s May 2010 auction for $95 million. But
how do we get from a conglomeration of relatively inexpensive paint, wood, and canvas to expensive art? What is actually being sold? Where does its value come from? How is aesthetic value defined, produced, and recognized? What is “value” anyway? Where do aesthetics meet money?!

Moving beyond standard economic models of value that hinge upon exchange, anthropological theories take on many forms and consider a broad range of variables such as labor, use, class, sentimentality, morality, semiotics, and so forth. The anthropological lens is multivalent, even kaleidoscopic: “From Smith and Ricardo to Marx and Mauss, and by way of Simmel and Saussure, the category has been used in varied ways to illuminate ethical, economic, aesthetic, logical, linguistic, and political dimensions of human life . . . The value of value may lie in its ability to elucidate and move across boundaries of many kinds” (Eiss and Pedersen 2008, 283, 287). Value is, thus, a foundational category and deserving of exploration across all domains of activity and experience.

Many anthropological theories start with Marx and develop “value” in ways that attend to some aspect of labor, use, or exchange with regard to contemporary capitalism. David Graeber, in Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams, for example, combines theoretical treatments by Mauss, Bhaskar, and Piaget to argue for value as a form of creative action (2001). Contributors to Meyer’s edited Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture (2002) take on implications of Weiner’s theory of inalienability within a capitalist context alongside Appadurai’s demonstration that objects take on different meanings as they move through different cultural contexts (Appadurai 1986; Weiner 1992). Taking a completely different angle, Foster (2007) explores how consumers, in the act of consumption, add value to goods over and above that promoted by marketing. Each of these
texts show that value can be used as a theoretical lens to transcend restrictive binary categories (like production vs. consumption or gift vs. commodity) and can provide an analytic device to address how social groups are connected by their interaction with a set or kind of good even when separated by time or space. Using value in this way, however, usually requires a sustained consideration of historical context.

Now, there is a small, but important, set of anthropological studies that take on art from the perspective of value and political economy; for example, Adler (1979) examined art as a form of labor while Plattner (1996) performed an ethnography of midlevel art markets. In connecting aesthetic to historical dynamics, Winegar (2006) wields value theory to investigate international markets for art, showing how the value of art operates as both an index and a tool in the negotiation of postcolonial identities and relationships. And Falls and Smith (2011a, 2011b) show that a colonialist legacy of ideas about the Khmer person, the historical migration of weaving practices, and the waxing and waning of dyeing technologies, all nested within the consumption practices of capitalism, enhance exchange value for both tourist and couture Cambodian ikat textiles. All of these anthropologies of art show how expressive culture is deeply entwined with other regimes of value and meaning.

Just as different notions of value appear in theory and analysis, the construction of the term varies in everyday talk. It is a word whose meaning at once expands and dissolves upon closer inspection, “value” is never inert. Its force is felt in every domain of social life—from the political and economic to the aesthetic, religious, scientific, semantic, and personal. And so, any study of value should consider a range of questions about relationships between various forms of value. I am specifically interested in examining the relationship between art and value: How is art valued? How much is
value about content, and how much is it about context? What are the short- and long-term consequences—to art, to artists, and to the publics they activate—of art becoming a financial instrument? What are the larger functions of art markets? The invisible logic that allows us to attach monetary value to visual culture can be penetrated by examining market extremes through the lens of political economy. Understanding recent movements in financial markets can help us understand why a screen print, paper collage of Jacqueline Kennedy by Andy Warhol sold at a 2012 auction for $626,000, more than twice the price of an average house sold in that same year in the United States. To illustrate the scales at which questions of art and value might to be considered, this essay focuses on a shallow slice of time for the market and addresses the work of (the recently deceased) American artist Thomas Kinkade.  

The Art Market

In 2007, the Dow Jones Industrial Average peaked at 14,198 points, and the art market reached unprecedented highs, with global revenue for fine art approaching $9.4 billion, more than double the $4.2 billion total for 2005 (Artprice 2010, 7). It seemed that the sky was the limit for both, so I followed with great interest how the 2008 financial crisis affected the contemporary art market (which makes up about 10 percent of the auction market), the total value of which has soared from $82 to $955 million in the last decade. Artwork by Hirst, Koons, and Murakami, which had done well in the years leading up to 2008, lost value and became scarcer in secondary (auction) sales.

Apropos of these shifts, Chris Burden’s 2009 Gagosian LA show, in which he planned to mount 3.3 million dollars worth of gold bars, was suspended because the bars, which were to serve as a reflection on the notion of value itself as well as on cultural behavior surrounding
things of value, were confiscated by the SEC as part of an investigation of Allen Stanford, the “Bernie Madoff” of LA, with whom Larry Gagosian had invested. The text on the Gagosian website explaining the problem read:

We regret to inform you that the opening reception on Saturday, March 7 must be cancelled.

100 kilos of gold bricks bought by Gagosian Gallery for CHRIS BURDEN: *One Ton One Kilo* was purchased from Stanford Coins and Bullion, a subsidiary of Stanford Financial Group, which as widely reported in the press, is now in receivership. Unfortunately, the gallery’s gold has been frozen while the SEC investigates Stanford.

CHRIS BURDEN: *One Ton One Kilo* cannot be mounted until the gold bullion is released. Please continue to check our website for a new opening date.³

This notice, ironically, is perhaps an even more powerful meditation on the relationship between material and ideological weights and measures, the art market, and hierarchies of value than Burden’s work itself. In fact, the constructed nature of value in the art world became acutely visible across the world as the larger financial crisis deepened, with real estate, investment portfolios, and artworks losing significant value.

There were more tectonic changes during the following year, 2010. As the Dow Jones continued to plunge and unemployment and foreclosure rates rose, Thomas Kinkade declared bankruptcy. China overtook the United States and the United Kingdom as the world’s largest auction-place for Fine Art (Artprice 2010). Many of the new buyers were the emerging Chinese million- and billionaire-class, and several Chinese artists acquired top-selling status. Today, the Occupy Wall Street movement should give the art world pause since
the trading practices being protested, especially complex deals on the derivatives market, have been in play with regard to skyrocketing art prices ever since the deregulation of financial markets (Tett 2009).4

Scholars tracking the dialogue between political economy and aesthetic shifts have productively understood art as labor, as a tool of the state, or even as a social world unto itself (Alexander and Rueschemeyer 2005; Becker 1984; Thornton 2008; Wolff 1993). Even more intriguing is work by art world insiders who have investigated the dynamics of commoditization (Eiss and Pedersen 2008; Graw 2010; Stallybrass 2004). Werner’s (2005) devastating analysis of the Guggenheim franchise Museum, Inc. argues that museum leadership, in keeping with best practices in neoliberal governance, began treating their collection as financial capital, thus undermining arts’ aesthetic and even academic character. When art becomes primarily an investment vehicle, it becomes an alibi for the institution whose main function it is to maintain the status quo. Here, content recedes into the background, and the art dematerializes. Could dematerialization be a new condition for art in a neoliberal context?

Insights drawn from both Walter Benjamin (1968) and Thorstein Veblen ([1894] 1964) can help us to understand better the work of Thomas Kinkade (Bush 1978). Sitting at the opposite end of the spectrum of critical acclaim from unique works included in the Guggenheim collection, the work sold as Kinkade art exemplifies mechanical reproduction in the age of neoliberalism. Together, the means of production and class-based collecting practices for Kinkade pieces cast into visibility a special relationship between art and political economy.

But, first, who is Thomas Kinkade, and why discuss him in the same paper with critically acclaimed artists who show in A-list galleries and museums and sell work at record-breaking prices? If you are searching your Art History 101 memory for some reference to
this work, you will likely not find it, although an excellent collection of essays, mostly by art historians, on *Thomas Kinkade: The Artist in the Mall* was just published by a prestigious academic press (Boylan 2011). Kinkade, self-proclaimed Painter of Light™ and “most collected living artist” in America, is rarely mentioned in college courses and certainly not in the company of respected collectables like Warhol, Murakami, or Hirst, although there are striking similarities, if not in the work itself, then in the context by which their work accrues value, and thus meaning. In fact, most critics have completely ignored Kinkade, whose work is completely disengaged with contemporary art trends.⁵
Photograph 8.2. Thomas Kinkade posing with *Coming Home* in 2005 said, “Peace and safety go hand in hand. The joy of living is the joy of freedom. Without freedom, there is no joy in life . . . I paint a world free from war, free from terrorism, free from fear and hatred and anger. The world I paint, I think it’s very affirming of the beliefs of people in this country and of the service people who are overseas waging a war to protect those beliefs” (Quigley 2005). (Photograph in the public domain)

Though he has been called a naïve postmodernist, and perhaps for good reason, Kinkade has described his own work as antimodernist. He says he is following in the plein air, impressionist tradition, with most of his work representing unpeopled dramatic landscapes
and cottage scenes. Thomas Kinkade products contain relentlessly sanitized images of romantic nature, cozy home life, and apple-pie Americana without any trace of irony or pastiche. God, nature, and family are not dead; none of that ever happened. In his more performative moments, he assumed a vaguely French persona, wearing a beret or taking the name Robert Girrard. Recent work has an overtly evangelical and/or patriotic bent, sometimes veering toward NASCAR or Disney.

You will not find this work at Gagosian or white cube-style galleries, taste-making museums, art fairs, or major auctions, although the artist Jeffrey Vallance did put together what turned out to be a rather controversial installation of Kinkade’s works at California State at Fullerton’s Grand Central Art Center. This fascinating exhibit, *Heaven on Earth*, displayed a vast array of original paintings and “Kinkadia,” bric-a-brac modeled on Kinkade’s aesthetic that was to serve as a shrine as well as a contemporary installation work. The strength of the exhibit was in its ambiguous position on the painter and the work, with Vallance intimating that Kinkade is the ultimate trickster (Vallance 2011; Vallance and Kinkade 2004).
Photographs 8.3 and 8.4. Installation views of *Heaven on Earth*, curated by Jeffrey Vallance, Grand Central Art Center, Santa Ana, California. (Used by permission of Jeffrey Vallance)

But most of Kinkade’s fans meet him in “Gold” and “Silver” Signature stores in malls, along tourist strips, and at QVC and online. Here in Savannah, Georgia (where I teach anthropology at an art and design school), a Kinkade “Gallery Of Light” appears alongside horse and buggy rides, trinket stores, and fudge shoppes to complete the old-timey tourist scene that makes up City Market. Exemplary of what anthropologist David Howes (2005) calls the “experience economy,” this carpeted, family room simulacra houses chatty franchise owners who (seem to) believe in the “paintings” and less pricey “merch” like night-lights, teddy bears, and fridge magnets. The store is busy; tourists come in to browse, turn the gallery lights up and down to view the luminescent effect on the pictures, and visit pieces that they already have or aspire to buy. The interior design, friendliness, and Muzak are deliberate semiotic departures from silent “white-cube” spaces that are sparse, brightly lit, and overseen by hushed galleristas.
That there is a cash register in plain view is no mistake; anyone can purchase these objects (supposedly, one in twenty American homes boasts a “Living the Light” lifestyle item), in contrast to the pedigree needed to purchase work from elite galleries who ask potential buyers (Thornton 2008): What else do you own? What will you do with it? Can you be trusted not to negatively impact the price of other works? Many, if not most, of Kinkade’s customers have never owned anything they considered to be art, a fact that the Kinkade franchise promotes as a democratization of the aesthetic economy.

Given these facts, it is interesting to note that Kinkade is himself no art world outsider, at least by virtue of training or contacts, but he is a rogue of sorts. Born in northern California under modest circumstances, he serendipitously met and apprenticed under the painter Glenn Wessels, who helped arrange for his admission to the University of California at Berkeley. Kinkade later attended Pasadena Art Center College of Design, where his tightly choreographed narrative reports, he became “bored” when asked to draw a nude model and had a religious conversion experience, producing a veiled Jesus instead (although he reportedly does have a collection of erotic paintings that are not for sale). Later, Hollywood fantasy illustrator Frank Frazetta hired him to paint background images for Ralph Bakshi’s now canonical rotoscope feature Fire and Ice, which has been convincingly described as a spectacular example of “batshit crazy” pornokitsch (Anne 2010).

But, in spite of his insider background and training, his work—repetitive, sugary, and formulaic almost to the point of parody—is wholly detached from concepts or trends that receive critical attention in the art world. He claims to reject what he characterizes as a postmodern, antiChristian, antimoral Establishment that has failed to embrace him. But, finding that his small “impressionistic”
renderings of the Carmel seaside did have a market, Kinkade and a partner started Lighthouse Publishing in 1989, eventually selling mechanically reproduced giclees upon which workers he calls “master highlighters” dab bits of paint to make the piece look like a painting that supposedly accrues value over time. The few giclees that have been dabbed by Kinkade himself, thus imparting his aura, are the most expensive, while the thousands of giclees touched only by lowly workshop staff are the least pricey. These giclees are pointedly sold as investments; potential customers are given a price sheet and educated about how the relative rarity impacts the price of the “editions” of each painting.

Kinkade models his sales strategy on the idea that art is a financial investment while simultaneously shunning the kind of art for which this strategy works best. And while investors of Kinkade products are still waiting for their investments to pay off, Kinkade himself was making a fortune until 2010 when his company, then called Media Arts, filed for bankruptcy. That the fall of Kinkade’s business is related to the collapse of the global economy that also put the kibosh on Burden’s show and impacted the value of Hirst’s opus is a given. But what kind of artist is Kinkade, and how does political economy link him to A-list figures?

Commenting on the admixture of art theory and finance, Andy Warhol remarked that “being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art” (Stiles 1996, 342). So perhaps making money through franchised aesthetics is Kinkade’s revenge against what he calls the critical elite. Perhaps his business is his art. Is this all an elaborate performance meant to cast cultural trends into critical relief? While the idea represents an intriguing possibility, I suspect this would be giving Kinkade too much credit.
When Joseph Beuys, another art world darling with a famous definition of the artist, said that everyone is an artist, what he meant was that there could be artistry to funneling the inchoate into order, through material or language. An artist is one who expresses or transforms, the medium is not important. One might even argue, like Goebbels did, that the political order is the plastic art of the state (Frankl [1946] 2006). In a similar vein, Giorgio Agamben (2009), in his essay “What is Contemporary,” defines an artist as one who is not only reflexive but also “sees into the darkness,” understanding what others do not and bringing an alternative vista to our attention (44-47). Kinkade certainly sees himself in this role, or at least pretends to, and in this sense, is perhaps more interesting, even if he is unwitting, than Warhol’s businessman or Beuys’ everyman. But, I would like to sidestep debates about intention and what a “real” artist is like, and instead levy Agamben’s claim to explore the value of Kinkade’s work, which is where the Gordian knot of aesthetics and political economy really comes into play.

With the rise of commodity capitalism, where identity is produced and maintained by displaying the mass-produced goods that we purchase, art has emerged as a major category of investment and consumption. Forget about Marxian notions of labor, use, and surplus value, as well as the twinned notions of supply and demand (traditional categories through which economists have understood value). The relevant categories are now sign and exchange value. Semiotically, visual culture has shifted from ornament to index under capitalist conditions, where its salient characteristics are novelty, obtuseness, and the collapse of meaning into price. In other words, relatively “useless” objects can obtain social meaning by virtue of cost and the degree to which it is new, unique, or hard to acquire. That Kinkade explicitly advances the decorative value of his
work by instructing consumers on the imaginative steps they should take to appreciate it and attempts to imbue the work with a spiritual aura through linguistic and marketing gymnastics is testament to the threat of art as ornament.

On the other hand, with regard to exchange value, Kinkade’s prices adhere to a highly managed pyramid scale, with a relatively expensive and “rare” giclee highlighted by “master apprentices” valued at about $1,000. At the other end of the art market, Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, or the stuffed shark, sold for $12 million, and Tranquility, a butterfly series painting, also executed by assistants, recently fetched over $1.7 million. What I want to suggest is that although they are positioned at opposite ends of the art world, Kinkade, Hirst, and their respective consumers are all enabled and codefined by the context of consumer capitalism in which they are equally ensconced. Like two sides of the same coin, Kinkade is the anti-Hirst.

What do I mean by this? Many new millionaires and even billionaires were produced as a result of Reagan’s and Thatcher’s economic policies, sometimes referred to as postmodern capitalism or advanced neoliberal capitalism (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism, the dominant political economic practice (first in the United States and the United Kingdom, and then elsewhere in the politically “relevant” world) since the 1980s, proposes that “human well-being is best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 2). This policy includes deregulation of the financial markets, a sector I mention in particular because now hedge fund managers and other money wizards, like Steve Cohen who purchased Hirst’s shark, can make upwards of $90,000 an hour (Thompson 2008). And what are these financial wizards to do with this wealth? How can a new
millionaire distinguish himself? One way is to compete for what Veblen calls status granting “conspicuous consumption” through the purchase of fine art. Here, prestige—political, economic, social, and aesthetic—is simultaneously generated, exchanged, intermingled, and displayed.

Clearly, aesthetic activity belies political and economic capital and is foundational to contemporary capitalism. I say foundational because aesthetic sociality provides a medium through which people display, claim, or even negotiate, an ethos of worthiness, taste, “beauty,” and genius. And it is not a mere coincidence that the fine art market has, in many ways, become as attractive a place for elites to invest as the stock trade. The big money game of contemporary art is deeply implicated in the conspicuous consumption around which neoliberal capitalism revolves.

But what is perhaps even more significant is emulation of the higher by the lower classes because it represents overall buy in to a system of status making, a buy in to deepening class inequality by middle and working classes who, by the way, constitute Kinkade’s customer base. For most of them, buying power of wages has been flat since the 1980s, while worker productivity is up in the face of off-shoring, temporary and contract work, layoffs, forced vacation, and unpaid furlough, which have all contributed to massive increases in wealth for top earners. As one snarky Salon critic put it, Kinkade’s work is created for “very, very worn-out and perhaps even traumatized people” (Miller 2002), and perhaps there is some truth to this. Frankfurt School scholars like Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno certainly understood mass-produced culture as functioning to help wrecked workers refuel for the next day of industrialized drudgery.

Seen from another angle, the distance between Kinkade and more expensive market artists reflects the culture-wars world where educated critique has become “elitist”; citizens are flattened into
consumer types, and nostalgia for disinfected nature, safe home-
towns, and old-fashioned morality is a reigning mode of collec-
tive identity. Here, actual politics—the making of decisions by an
informed public for the greater good—is reduced to a popularity
contest between candidates whose positions differ only in the most
superficial of ways. And it is small wonder that people suffering
from such structural violence might be drawn to the kind of refuge
Kinkade explicitly says he is creating.

Kinkade’s work, however, is different from that of artists like Hirst
or Koons, because while, like a good auctioneer, store personnel per-
form an elaborate sales pitch to explicate content and even build art
historical value, they work particularly hard to position his products
as an “investment” for a public who have no or very little experience
with venture art. This is important because it recapitulates the idea
that content can become secondary to exchange value, even at this
level. So far, their efforts have been wildly successful. Between 1997
and 2005, Thomas Kinkade earned more than $50 million dollars in
royalties (Christenson 2006).

Mechanical Reproduction in the Age of Neoliberalism

The art market invites exploration of larger contexts because buy-
ing and selling art is a rarified universe in which cultural dynamics
are cast into relief. Kinkade’s work—mechanical reproduction in the
age of neoliberalism—is a powerfully literal expression of contem-
porary values, and it tells us who we are, just as Hirst’s, Murakami’s,
or Warhol’s does. The same dynamics that produce soaring prices
for stuffed sharks, masturbating cowboys, and screen prints of soup
cans, make possible the “Most Collected Artist in America.” They
are mirror images, extremes at the ends of a single continuum.

Our interactions with aesthetics, especially in the arena of ven-
ture art, operate within a system that transfers wealth toward the
top one to two percent. Investment in hedge funds and real estate has been augmented by investing in art—paintings, for example, are unique instruments that confer status as well as potentially making money. As Veblen had pointed out by 1899, the proletariat emulates consumption by the leisure class. Kinkade has rightly expected and exploited this behavior, promoting his work as investment-grade art for the working person.

While a few exceptional texts are out there, the social and economic context of the art world remains largely unexamined by anthropologists. But the aesthetic economy, as an object of study and as an activity, is critical to the reproduction of social realities. So while we do not have to like or respect them, it is for this reason that aesthetic workers like Thomas Kinkade and his constituents must be taken seriously.

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Notes

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2. Thomas Kinkade died in 2012 of acute intoxication of alcohol and Valium. He was at the time with Amy Pinto-Walsh, his live-in girlfriend of eighteen months. Galleries reported an uptick in sales following his death (Cox 2012).


4. For play-by-play on the deregulation of the financial markets, see http://www.marketoracle.co.uk/Article8210.html.

5. Critic Dave Hickey, friendlier to the popular than most, said of Kinkade that he “pretended to make terrible, disingenuous paintings that were mostly cranked out in a factory in China. You can tell by the excessive use of thalo green and alizarin crimson-Chinese restaurant colors. Also, they are all pastiche; Saxon cottages do not have bay windows.” Even this dismissal of Kinkade was more than most critics were willing to state. (For the complete Hickey interview, see http://www.planetjh.com/music_arts_culture/A_108312.aspx.)

6. I recently heard Kinkade describe this experience on a YouTube video of the Press Conference for the Vallance installation. Kinkade reports that he was not aware that he was drawing Jesus. When he looked down and saw the image, he was surprised. It was as if the hand of God had drawn it. Kinkade then went on to preempt any “postmodern critics” who will say this sounds hokey by suggesting that in the modern era it was not that uncommon for people
to experience such spiritual events. This narrative was very much in keeping with Kinkade’s ongoing efforts to position himself as an artist representing values of a bygone time. In his decidedly modernist posing, he weirdly appears to inhabit a postmodern sensibility. One does wonder at times if the entire exercise is not an elaborate ruse. (See Jeffrey Vallance’s “Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth,” which was curated by Jeffrey Vallance http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64m0i6a8wPY.)

7. *Fire and Ice* has been rated the 99th greatest film of all time by the online film critics society. (See “OFCS Top 100: Top 100 Animated Features,” http://www.ofcs.org/2010/09/ofcs-top-100-top-100-animated-features.html, accessed October 17, 2011.)

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