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## Three views of a saleroom. Valorization in and valuation of visual artworks by (mostly) Watteau, Altman and Banksy

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Michael Hutter

Three views of a saleroom.

Valorization in and valuation of visual artworks  
by (mostly) Watteau, Altman and Banksy

#### ABSTRACT

In the European tradition, markets have usually been represented as the place where the actual, live exchanges take place. The article therefore focuses on saleroom representations. These affect their own artistic value in two ways, leading to two questions: in a first move, the saleroom is an artistic device. How does the artist, or those who collaborate in creating an artwork, use references to a saleroom in order to put value into the work, to enrich it and thus contribute to its *valorization*? In a second move, spectators attribute value to the work, and they assess its value in comparison with that of other, similar works, and they pay money to possess works. How do they react to the use of the saleroom, what part does it play in their *valuation* of a particular work? To explore these questions, three works were selected: Antoine Watteau's *Shopsign of the art dealer Gersaint* is

a fictitious version of the dealer's showroom; Robert Altman's film *Vincent and Theo* opens with the Christie's auction sale of one of Van Gogh's *Vase with sunflowers* paintings and goes on to recapitulate the relationship between Vincent and his brother Theo; Banksy's 2006 canvas version of *Girl with Balloon*, half-shredded during its Sotheby's auction sale and re-named *Love is in the Bin*, was applauded as the first artwork to be created during an auction event. Salerooms, however, show only one part of art markets. The conditions of production as well as the drives that shape consumption remain unnoticed. They would require other forms of representation and conceptualization. Salerooms are also an unlikely conceptual device to show features of political domination. And yet, the three works contain quite explicit references to this sphere of value.

## Introduction: Representation, valorization and valuation

Markets are places, real or virtual, where commodities are valued. The sum of money given in exchange for the right to use the commodity, permanently or temporarily, indicates its commercial value. In art markets, commodities are objects that are capable of generating visual images in the spectators' minds. The images, in most cases, make reference to some aspect of the world. They make that aspect present to its spectators – they re-present that aspect, which may be an object, a social relationship or an idea. When art markets are represented, representation becomes recursive: inevitably, the artwork in question is part of the social relationship that it represents. Some artworks – the minority by far – gain monetary value, based on some kind of agreement on its artistic qualities. Therefore, artworks that represent art markets offer particular opportunities to study the difference between monetary and artistic value.<sup>1</sup>

In the European tradition, markets have usually been represented as the place where the actual, live exchanges take place. Examples range from Joachim Beuckelaer's views of Dutch produce markets to Andreas Gursky's digitally manipulated images of discount stores. In the case of art markets, salerooms are the places where works are displayed, called up at auction and sold. I will therefore focus on representations of salerooms.

Saleroom representations affect their own artistic value in two ways, leading to two questions: in a first move, the saleroom is an artistic device. How does the artist, or those who collaborate in creating an artwork, use references to a saleroom in order to put value into the work, to enrich it and thus contribute to its *valorization*? In a second move, spectators attribute value to the work, and they assess its value in comparison with that of other, similar works, and they pay money to possess works. How do they react to the use of the saleroom, what part does it play in their *valuation* of a particular work?<sup>2</sup>

To observe the actual performance of famous artworks representing salerooms, three works were selected: Antoine Watteau's *Shopsign of the art dealer Gersaint* is a fictitious version of the dealer's showroom; Robert Altman's film *Vincent and Theo* opens with the Christie's auction sale of one of Van Gogh's *Vase with sunflowers* paintings and goes on to recapitulate the relationship between Vincent and his brother Theo; Banksy's 2006 canvas version of *Girl with Balloon*, half-shredded during its Sotheby's auction sale and renamed *Love is in the Bin*, was applauded as the first artwork to be created during an auction event. Regarding the names of the three authors, the study also reveals that they serve only as shorthand for more complex artistic collectives.

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1 On the theory of representation in artworks cf. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

2 Valuation practices take place in three modes, namely attribution, assessment and payment. For a broader discussion of valuation, see Michael Hutter, Three modes of valuation practices in art games, in *Valuation Studies* 8.1, 2021.

The three works represent salerooms in art markets that operated roughly one hundred years apart: 1720, 1890 and 2018. Altman's film connects two stages, 1890 and 1987. In section 1, I describe each of the three artworks, with a focus on the social treatment after their creation. In section 2, I interpret them, focusing on their valorization through the device of a saleroom and on the valuation of their singular artistic invention.



Antoine Watteau, *L'Enseigne de Gersaint*, 1720/21, today in Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin. Wikimedia, Public Domain.

## 1. Descriptions

### “Watteau”: a saleroom, seen from the outside

In 1720, a year before his death, 36-year-old Antoine Watteau lodged with the aspiring art dealer Edme-François Gersaint, who was just about to open his new shop on Pont Notre-Dame in Paris. Watteau offered to paint the large shop sign to be placed above the entrance of the shop, facing the street. Watteau joined two sheets of extra-heavy twill to cover the width of three meters. The figures were slightly elongated to compensate for the upward perspective of passers-by.

The saleroom is shown without the wall that separates it from the spectator. The room is deep and wide, and behind it, a second room is suggested. The walls are covered with oil paintings in heavy frames. The paintings show conventional topics, but each of them is a pictorial invention that somehow alludes to the persons acting directly underneath. On the left, there are clerks packaging portraits of Louis XIV and a genteel couple entering the space. On the right, there is M. Gersaint in the process of advertising an oval painting with bathing nudes to an elderly couple, while Mme. Gersaint demonstrates the features of the then newly invented folding mirror to a group of three younger customers.

Immediately after its installation, the shop sign attracted lively attention from passing crowds. Two weeks later, it was sold to Claude Glucq, a tapestry manufacturer, who ceded it to his nephew Jean de Julienne, one of the most prominent collectors and art *amateurs* in Paris. Julienne commissioned the painter Jean-Baptiste Pater (1695-1736) to crop the sides of the piece, add canvas on top and fill the added surface with paintings that refer to classical works, thus transforming the curved shape of the original into a conventional rectangular shape, increasing the already exaggerated height of the showroom even further. In addition, Julienne separated the two halves along the seam joining the two sheets and ended up with two paintings in upright format, as was the fashion of the epoch. He also commissioned the best engravers available to produce a volume of one hundred copper engravings of major works by Watteau, most of which were in his possession. In 1746, a Hamburg art dealer sold the two paintings for 1,650 thalers to Friedrich II of Prussia, who had also accumulated a sizeable collection of paintings by Watteau. In 1932, after this royal collection had come into the possession of the young republic's museum, the two halves were reassembled. Today, they are displayed in a single frame at Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin.<sup>3</sup> The arc that separates the part painted by Watteau from the extension painted by Pater is still clearly visible.

Gersaint went on to become the most prominent art dealer of his generation in Paris. He was the first to use auction catalogues with a scholarly commentary on artist, provenance and content of the paintings and drawings on sale. In a catalogue published in 1744, he already refers to the former shop sign as a “famous masterpiece”. Apart from this reference, attention was sparse compared to the enormous popularity of Watteau's *fêtes galantes*, which inspired the works of his successors for several decades. Subsequently, Watteau fell into oblivion. Around the mid-nineteenth century, Watteau's artistic qualities were rediscovered and his invented dresses even inspired female fashion. In 1875, *Shop sign of Gersaint* was located and praised by the critic and collector Edmond de Goncourt. Since then, it has steadily gained in reputation among the painter's works. Today, the subtle shift from the mythical figures in idyllic landscape to the “painted conversations”<sup>4</sup> of real persons in a commercial transaction is widely appreciated, and the “skillful mixture between verisimilitude and exaggeration” much admired.<sup>5</sup>

## “Altman”: A saleroom, and its counterpart

*Vincent & Theo* opens with a recording of the auction room at Christie's, when, on 30 March 1987, Van Gogh's *Vase with fifteen sunflowers* was sold. The soundtrack of the recording continues in the background for five minutes, while the film's opening scene shows young Vincent, announcing to his brother Theo that he was going to be a painter. In response, his brother reveals that he, not their father, has been supporting Vincent

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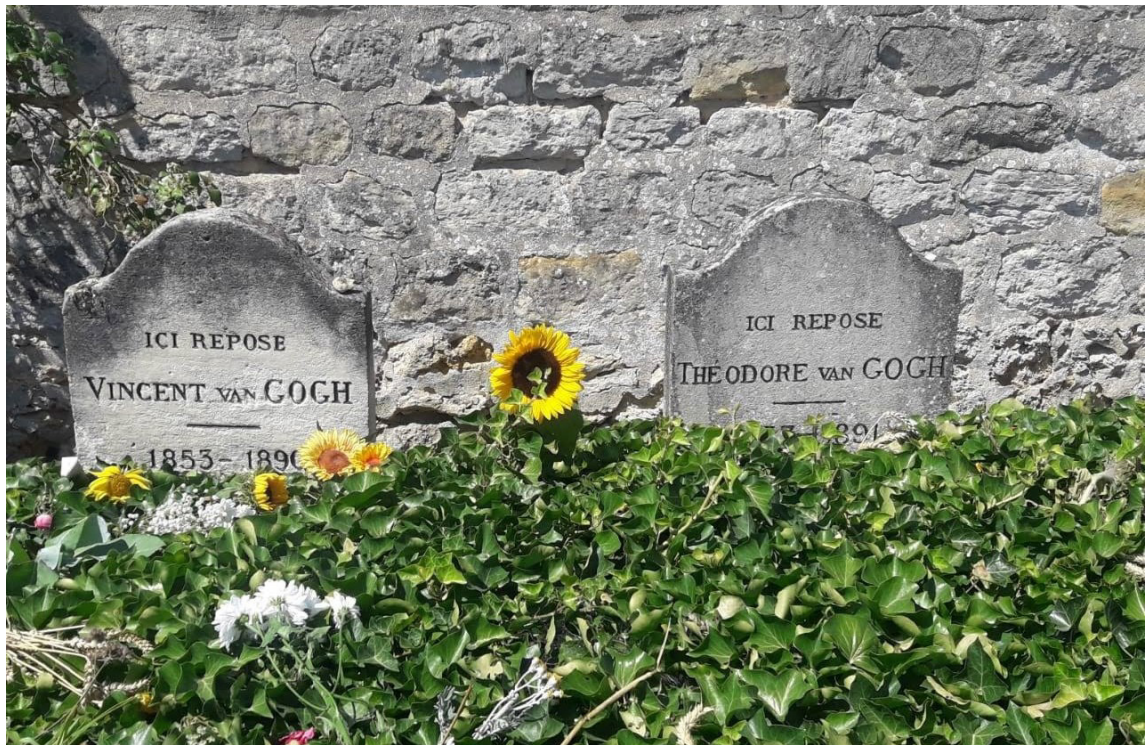
3 On the history of the painting and on its academic treatment, as well as on the activities of Gersaint, cf. Michael Hutter, *The Rise of the Joyful Economy. Artistic Innovation and Economic Growth from Brunelleschi to Murakami* (London: Routledge, 2015), ch.6.

4 Mary Vidal, *Watteau's Painted Conversations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

5 Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Watteau 1684-1721* (Cologne: Koenemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), 16.



financially. The film returns to the saleroom, where the auctioneer brings the hammer down at 22.5 million British pounds, at the time the highest price ever paid for an artwork. In a sequence of episodes, the film continues to enact the relationship between the two brothers, as Vincent moves from Holland to Paris, then on to Arles and Auvers-sur-Oise. Other real-life characters, like Paul Gauguin or Paul Gachet, have supporting roles. An uncle of the van Gogh brothers was a partner at Goupil & Co., a prominent dealership in traditional art, with salerooms in Paris, Den Haag, Brussels and London.<sup>6</sup> Theo works at the gallery, despite his aversion against its conservative taste. Vincent pursues his painterly goals uncompromisingly and accuses his brother of being incapable of finding clients for the paintings: “Don’t tell me there is no market for my works!” While Theo marries Johanna Bonger and becomes a father, Vincent becomes increasingly unstable. He paints incessantly, but commits acts of self-harm, ending with a gunshot into his belly. After his death, Theo turns away from his family, shutting himself into a room with all the paintings he was given in exchange for his financial support. He dies of syphilis, six months after his brother. The last take of the film returns to documentary mode: it shows their two identical gravestones, side by side in the cemetery of Auvers-sur-Oise.



Gravestones of Vincent and Theo van Gogh, by José Renato Venancio Resende, CC-BY-SA 4.0. Wikimedia, Public Domain.

Robert Altman had enjoyed early fame in the 1970s as a maverick, yet commercially successful film director, especially with *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Nashville*. After a period of failed or clearly non-commercial projects, he came back to prominence with two TV miniseries

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6 Walter Feilchenfeldt, Vincent van Gogh – seine Sammler – seine Händler, in Georg-W. Költzsch and Ronald de Leeuw, eds., *Vincent van Gogh und die Moderne: 1890–1914* (Essen: Museum Folkwang, 1991), 39-46.

– *Tanner '88* (1988) and *Vincent & Theo* (1990).<sup>7</sup> The latter project was initiated by a Dutch TV producer, Ludi Boeken, who later sold the series of four 50-minute segments to national TV channels throughout Europe. Altman negotiated the right to produce a shorter, 138-minute cinema version. This movie was also released in 1990, first in Europe and later in the USA. It grossed, according to Internet Movie Database, 2.23 million U.S. Dollars in the US, a rather modest sum. Data on the sale of the TV rights are not available.<sup>8</sup>

The production of *Vincent & Theo* was, as in all of Altman's films, a collaborative act. Scriptwriter Julian Mitchell, composer Gabriel Yared, cinematographer Jean Lepine, production-designer Stephen Altman and several editors were all part of a team that worked with Altman over many years. In addition, Altman's style of directing left much space for the actors, in this case Tim Roth and Paul Rhys, to interpret and improvise around the script. Still, the film's style and focus were shaped by Altman. The style aims for a realistic representation of social interaction, where persons constantly interrupt each other, and words are mumbled or screamed, often unintelligibly. This is intentional, to keep the spectator alert, in fear of missing something. It "breaks the fourth wall", as Altman commented in an interview.<sup>9</sup> The focus is, as in practically all his films, on "the walking wounded" – failing, faltering males.<sup>10</sup> In *Vincent & Theo*, this character is split into two people who are "like two sides of a coin, inseparable".<sup>11</sup> The measure of success, which both of them fail, is commercial.<sup>12</sup> It is represented, in cartoon-like simplicity, by the Goupil art gallery. Here, paintings are just decorative commodities, sold to ignorant bourgeois clients and rich tourists. Against this background, Vincent performs the ultimate counteraction, he literally eats color and bleeds color, while at the same time berating his lack of commercial success. Theo, however, is just as tormented, split between his desire for a comfortable family life, albeit financed by selling aesthetically worthless objects, and his inability to convince collectors to buy some of Vincent's paintings.

The critics' response to *Vincent & Theo* was highly positive. Pauline Kael, then the most authoritative voice in the field, observed in the *New Yorker* that the brothers' relationship as presented in the film demonstrated "that their bond of love of art is also a bond of shared rage at the world of commerce." She wrote of "the bitter entanglement of art and commerce", and she perceived the auction as "a union of the worlds the brothers

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7 For details on the history and the story of the film, cf. Robert Niemi, *The Cinema of Robert Altman Hollywood Maverick* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 134-140.

8 Cf. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100873/>, visited 12 April 2020. Altman was very dissatisfied with Boeken's handling of the TV rights and won a 2 million US Dollar claim against him. Cf. Mitchell Zukoff, *Robert Altman. The Oral Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 401-402.

9 Altman in Southbank Interview, published on DVD *Vincent & Theo*.

10 Cf. Beverly Walker, Altman '91, in *Film Comment*, 27/1, 1991, 5-10; Tom Dorey, Lawful Lawyer, Vigilante Father: Altman, Masculinity and "The Gingerbread Man", in Adrian Danks, ed., *A Companion to Robert Altman* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015), 401-422.

11 Altman in Southbank Interview.

12 Niemi points out that the ampersand joining the two names is usually employed in the names of firms. Cf. Niemi, *Robert Altman*, 135.

are trapped in, a culmination of their yearnings and frustrations.”<sup>13</sup> Rita Kempley, staff writer for the *Washington Post*, viewed the introductory auction as “the ultimate travesty, bidding on a ruined man’s agony. Going, going, gone.” and concluded: “*Vincent & Theo* is more than art appreciation, it is a treasure in its own right, unframed and arcing in the projector’s light.”<sup>14</sup> In retrospect, incurring critical favour may have been part of Altman’s strategy in creating works “that would be readily assimilable by the reviewers who would be intermediaries between his movies and the mass audiences they had to reach if he were to remain ‘bankable’ as an aging director in a youth-oriented marketplace.”<sup>15</sup>

Shifting the focus of observation to the historical process, the ascent of Van Gogh’s works to become a peak in the artistic canon also appears as a kind of collaborative act, drawn out over decades.<sup>16</sup> Vincent had understood the payments by his brother as genuine purchase prices and therefore continued to pass finished works on to him. When Theo died, he left his wife around 500 paintings and 400 drawings. Johanna van Gogh-Bonger made an inventory and kept a ledger on her sales. She made it a principle to lend or sell to several dealers, keeping prices relatively high. The dealer Ambroise Vollard and the critic Julien Leclercq were among the early promoters of Van Gogh. For a first solo-exhibition with catalogue in 1901, Leclercq gained the cooperation of Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris. The exhibition attracted great attention in art circles throughout Europe. Paul Cassirer, the well known Berlin-based art dealer, took more than fifty paintings on loan from Bonger for shows between 1901 and 1906.<sup>17</sup> Exhibitions in Amsterdam, Dresden and Zürich followed. Works by Van Gogh were now acquired by major German and Swiss art collectors. A show in London in 1910 presented Van Gogh’s works alongside those of Manet, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso. When Johanna Bonger died in 1925, the once unsellable works were well placed in private collections, and museum directors began, over considerable opposition, to buy his paintings and drawings. Fifty years later, Van Gogh’s works had achieved international recognition. The purchase of *Vase with fifteen sunflowers* in 1987 by the director of a Japanese insurance company was consequential. All of Van Gogh’s larger-size oil paintings that came up for auction since 1987 achieved even higher prices.

The admiration for Van Gogh’s work is not only expressed in the magnitude of such purchases but also in continued popular interest, as demonstrated by 6,000 daily visitors

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13 Pauline Kael, *Movie Love. Complete Reviews 1988-1991* (New York: Dutton, 1991), quotes on pages 292, 293 and 290, respectively.

14 Quoted in [https://www.wikizero.com/en/Vincent\\_and\\_Theo](https://www.wikizero.com/en/Vincent_and_Theo), visited 6 April 2020.

15 David Sterritt, *Breaking the Rules: Altman, Innovation and the Critics*, in Danks, *A Companion*, 92-116, 112.

16 Information for this paragraph was drawn from Feilchenfeldt, *Van Gogh – seine Sammler*.

17 Cassirer was among those gallerists who believed that modern art had to be displayed not in overly decorated, but in bare, colorless surroundings. Cf. Malcolm Gee, *Modern Art Galleries in Paris and Berlin, c.1890-1933: types, policies and modes of display*, in *Journal for Art Market Studies* 2/1 (2018), 1-16.



to Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum and a million followers on its Instagram account.<sup>18</sup> These numbers are not accidental. The brand Vincent van Gogh is kept topical by the museum's temporary exhibitions, juxtaposing him with the work of contemporary painters like David Hockney, and by a steady stream of postings. Such were the many steps of valorization that moved Van Gogh's works from utter neglect to singular worth.

## "Banksy": a saleroom, inside an artwork

In 2002, the anonymous artist who signs his works "Banksy" stencil-sprayed an image representing a girl that looks and reaches for a heart-shaped red balloon. He sprayed it in two London locations: the first version on a shopfront in Shoreditch, the second version on a wall at the South Bank. The second version was painted over, the first one removed and eventually sold at auction. Banksy used *Girl with Balloon* many times in locations around the world. He also edited a print version, with 150 signed and 600 unsigned copies.<sup>19</sup> Such prints were among those offered in 2006 at *Barely legal*, a weekend event in Los Angeles that combined a live "elephant in the room", colorfully painted, with the sale of prints and replicas of Banksy's works. The show sold out, and 30,000 visitors came. After the show, the artist created a unique version of *Girl with Balloon* on canvas and mounted it in a "National-Gallery-like"<sup>20</sup> massive gilded frame. He gifted it, with dedication, to an undisclosed person. The person may have been Banksy's photographer, gallerist and organizer of the LA show, Steve Lazarides. The owner consigned *Girl with Balloon* to Sotheby's London for the sale on 5 October 2018.

As it was the most spectacular item, *Girl with Balloon* was the final lot of the evening sale. The episode was recorded by three phone cameras, later edited and presented, first on Instagram in a 3-minute clip titled *Shred the Love – The Director's half cut*. On Youtube, it was uploaded on 17 October 2018.<sup>21</sup> The video opens with a street view of Sotheby's in London, then shows people in conversation at the event. As the work comes up, the auctioneer starts the bidding at 200,000 British pounds and calls out the increasing bids in a setting very similar to the auction of Van Gogh's painting at Christie's thirty years before. He drops the gavel at 860,000 British pounds in a gesture of awe, given the new record price for a work by Banksy. The clip continues with a quick shot of a hand pushing the red button of a remote control device, then shows consternation, dismay, laughter among the audience as it slowly realizes that the canvas is exiting the gilded frame in shredded strips. A shot of the auctioneer shows restrained irritation. At about half the length of the canvas, the shredding stops. The piece is quickly taken off the wall and moved to another room. Lettering appears: "In rehearsals it worked every time...". Then, a trial run with

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18 Cf. <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/news-and-press/press-releases/van-gogh-museum-2019-number-of-dutch-visitors-continues-to-rise?v=1>, visited 6 April 2020.

19 <https://www.myartbroker.com/artist/banksy/girl-with-balloon/>, visited 4 Feb. 2020.

20 The quote is from the interview with Alex Branczik, cited below.

21 In posting the video, a second artwork was created. It was labeled as documentation, but it manipulates representation of historical events just as much as Altman's *Vincent & Theo*.

an identically framed canvas is shown. As the strips of canvas fall to the ground with a thump, a woman giggles.

The “artist’s prank” was reported worldwide, even in general interest media. Sotheby’s denied any complicity in the action. Its spokesperson was quick to suggest that the intervention had generated a new work of art, the first ever to be created live during an auction. Right after the auction, Banksy posted a video on his Instagram feed, titled *Going, going gone* that showed the installation of the shredder with the words “A few years ago, I secretly built a shredder into a painting... in case it was ever put up for auction.” This post was removed shortly, and then replaced by *Shred the Love -The Director’s half cut.*, The altered work was renamed *Love is in the Bin* by Pest Control, a virtual “handling service” through which Banksy authenticates and sells his works.

The person who had offered the winning bid sustained the offer for the new object. She remained anonymous, described only as “a female European collector”.<sup>22</sup> Through an agreement with Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, *Love is in the Bin* was exhibited there from March 2019 until February 2020. Protected by a thick glass plate bolted to the wall, the work was sent on a round of juxtapositions with works by Rembrandt, Monet, Fontana, Broodthaers and Duchamp, each time accompanied by lectures, panels and performance events. More than 100,000 visitors saw *Love is in the Bin* before it was returned to the collector.

The extraordinary valuation of Banksy’s artwork and artistic intervention in terms of media attention, visitor number and money paid to the previous owner, plus Sotheby’s buyer’s premium, can only be understood in the context of Banksy’s work history and artistic genre.

Banksy performs in the context of street art, not gallery art. Street artworks are directed at passers-by and residents, not at an affluent elite. Street artworks are temporary and ephemeral, due to their medium and exposed position, but also due to their transgressivity. Because of their fleeting nature, the “traces” of photography and video documentation become extensions of the work. The temporariness is also intended to shield the works from easy commercialization. The “graffiti” are placed in the public sphere, but the surfaces that are used have owners, be they private or communal. They either preserve, extract and sell them as artworks, or they have them painted over. Street artworks are produced in sequences, as repetition generates brand recognition. Such brands may consist in simple tag letters, but also in stenciled images, since stencils, like silkscreens, are a device for producing identical copies. Street artists prefer to remain anonymous because they are in danger of being sanctioned for their transgressions. Anonymity also serves to hide identity, gender and number of persons involved. The choice of a pseudo-name is part of the performance. In the case at hand, the artist’s clear name is prob-

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22 “At first I was shocked,” said the winning bidder and proud owner, having decided to keep the work, “but I realised I would end up with my own piece of art history.” See <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-45818204>, visited 4 Feb. 2020.

ably Robin Gunningham. In early work, he called himself “Robin Banks”, then he began to sign sprayed works as “Banksy!”. The exclamation mark connotes the onomatopoeic “bang”, as expression for a gunshot. The artist signs his books as “Robin Banksy”, quite close to “robbin’ banks”, as he himself suggested in image and in words.<sup>23</sup>

Banksy’s artistic inventions are consistently directed against commercialized culture, yet they show awareness of the inevitable double-bind – as in the digital work where “Destroy-Capitalism”-T-Shirts are sold to punk-styled youths at 30 US Dollars apiece. The double-bind applies to Banksy’s own artistic practice as well: how can he preach resistance to commercial culture, and act within it as a producer who sells works for money?

Banksy solves the predicament through a strict separation between commercial products and artistic works. The products are replicas, not traces, of original works. They come as paper prints, in editions of several hundreds, or as polystone figurines, or as photographs. Production is often attributed to an anonymous collective titled *Brandalism*. Banksy calls these products “souvenirs”. They assist the mind in recalling or imagining the experience of seeing the original work during its brief period of existence. *Girl with Balloon* is a hybrid case: it is another stenciled replica of the original image that combines the cliché of the windswept girl with that of the heart-shaped balloon. Yet, the use of acrylic paint on canvas and the pseudo-baroque frame make the piece unique, and thus expose it to the desire for exclusive ownership. Banksy had tried to prevent such misuse by threatening destruction should the piece ever appear on the art market. So, as the auctioneer’s gavel dropped, the mechanism for self-destruction was activated.

It is of secondary relevance whether the shredder stopped intentionally or unintentionally. Had the shredder not stopped, the work would have consisted of the empty frame and the heap of strips on the floor. It would have been difficult to transport the installation without extensive manipulation. As it is, the canvas is still present, with strips dangling. In either case, a new work was created during an auction. The saleroom scene has become part of the work’s narrative, it is now a major component of the work, recorded in written descriptions, in the filmed version and in countless reports that use pieces of the original clip. The piece has been transformed from a work of traditional, representational art – girls, balloons – to a work of conceptual art – resistance to commercial domination as expressed through negation: the social mechanism of commercial validation is transformed into an aesthetic quality.<sup>24</sup> The work assembles itself only in the mind of the spectator who is sufficiently engaged to take at least part of the web of meanings and indications around the work into consideration.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Cf. Ulrich Blanché, *Konsumkunst. Kultur und Kommerz bei Banksy und Damien Hirst* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 322-323.

24 Banksy is not the only artist to make this conceptual move. Even more attention found integrations of commercial process in works by Damien Hirst (Cf. Blanché; *Konsumkunst*) and Takashi Murakami (Cf. Hutter, *Joyful Economy*). See also footnote 29.

25 Will Gompertz, Arts editor at BBC, was quick to note the strong connection to the work of Duchamp. He also argued that the heap-on-the-floor version “would actually be worth more“ than the current “incom-

Was Sotheby's a collaborator in creating *Love is in the Bin*? In an interview, Alex Branczik, Senior Director of the firm's contemporary art division, gave two convincing arguments against complicity: a commercial reason – the work was placed at the end of the sale session because it brought “the most interest”, so “we knew we would go out with a bang”, and an artistic reason – Banksy “would denude the artwork of its entire message” by collaborating with the auction house.<sup>26</sup>

*Love is in the Bin*, with its auction stunt story, reached an additional level of artistic power when the owner lent the piece to the Stuttgart art museum. Whereas Banksy's street sprayings usually are the only artistic shapes in environments shaped by commercial interests, this piece was juxtaposed with a series of highly esteemed works of Western art.<sup>27</sup> Protected against further intervention by its glass plate, the artwork's artistic value was signalled by its physical position aside “masterpieces”,<sup>28</sup> and by the series of spoken and literary confirmation of outstanding artistic quality.

## 2. Entanglements of commercial and artistic value

### Valorizing with salerooms, and valuating such treatment

We can now move from description to interpretation. For each of the three cases, we can ask about the “value added” by the represented salerooms: how did the creative collective called “the artist” employ a saleroom as a component of its artistic project? And how were these combinations of representation and conceptualization valued by the spectators? The first question focuses on the artistic strategy to put value into the work in question, to *valorize* it. Artworks may be representational, but they are inevitably conceptual. The choice of representation is governed by the conceptual strategy of “the artist”. Such a conceptual strategy can be assumed even for works of past centuries, at a time when this dimension had not yet been expressed in explicit terms.<sup>29</sup> The second question focuses on the reactions to the initial presentation of the three works, on the emotional as well as on the rational expressions. All of these reactions are observed by others and contribute

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plete“ version. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-45818204> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-45900314> . visited 4 Feb. 2020.

26 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgUvnznbCuc&frags=pl%2Cwn>. visited 4 Feb. 2020.

27 As Christiane Lange, the museum director, reports, the juxtaposition proved particularly fruitful with works by Rembrandt and Fontana, introduced Duchamp to a larger audience and was and less successful with Monet's *Fields in Spring*.

28 On the category of masterworks, see Frank Reijnders, *Master Pieces, Master Strokes* (Stockholm, Art and Theory Publishing, 2015).

29 The conceptual turn in the visual arts has added a further dimension to art interpretation. It was initiated by Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, carried on by artists like Joseph Beuys, Art & Language, or Marcel Broodthaers, and is currently fueled by the works of Adrian Piper, and Young British Artists like Damien Hirst and Banksy. Cf. Tony Godrey, *Conceptual Art (Art & Ideas)* (London: Phaidon Press, 1988), and Wikipedia for an overview.



to the process of *valuation* that generates the work's incremental accumulation of recognition and reputation.

Watteau used the saleroom for a conceptual strategy of disavowing artistic intention. Through the work's ostensible genre, he declares: "This piece is not an artful painting, it is only a shopsign". Under the cover of expectations oriented toward commercial profit gained from selling luxury goods, he can transgress rules of appropriateness and artistic skill. In such a setting, Watteau paints his own series of inventions on classical artistic themes, and stacks them on the walls of a palatial room, museum walls *avant la lettre*. The characters in the foreground, and their relationships, are referenced in the themes of the paintings above their heads. Thus, he generates two simultaneous levels of social relations – commercial payment in the foreground, and artistic valuation in the background.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the gesture of negation, spectators appreciated the work's artistic value from the beginning: Watteau had already been famous, despite his young age, so the presentation of the shopsign caused a remarkable sensation in a sensation-rich year – a few months later, John Law's monetary experiment collapsed, and the ensuing insolvencies precipitated economic depression. After the canvas was taken down and sold (at an undisclosed price) to Claude Glucq,<sup>31</sup> the physical shape and content were altered to make the work conform to the standards of contemporary artistic form and taste. Now, the work's appearance followed the conventions of an artwork. But *Shopsign of Gersaint* fell into oblivion after the transfer to the royal collection at Sanssouci Palace, it was not even among the artworks attractive enough to be confiscated for the central museum of world art planned by Napoleon and overseen by Dominique-Vivant Denon. After Watteau's artistic qualities were rediscovered and *Shopsign* was singled out as an outstanding achievement, the painting became worthy of physical reconstruction. The critical contributions to the exhibition catalogue for the 300th centenary of Watteau's birth in 1984 revealed new aspects of the painting,<sup>32</sup> and the use of the saleroom in *Shopsign* became a recognized topic of research in scholarly journals, adding to Watteau's already stellar reputation.<sup>33</sup>

In *Vincent & Theo*, Robert Altman employs the saleroom as a contrast to the representation of the artistic project capable of generating works that are eventually purchased for large sums of money. Again, the saleroom serves as a negation, not as a surface, but as the opposite of artistic value. Altman manages to double the conceptual distance be-

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30 Cf. Hutter, *Joyful Economy*, 151.

31 Glucq survived the Law scheme collapse without financial losses. Cf. Guillaume Glorieux, *À l'Enseigne de Gersaint. Edme-François Gersaint, marchand d'art sur le Pont Notre-Dame (1694-1750)*. Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2002.

32 Cf. Margaret Morgan Grasselli, *Watteau 1684-1721* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984).

33 Cf. Andrew McClellan, *Watteau's Dealer: Gersaint and the Marketing of Art in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, in *Art Bulletin* 78/3, 1996, 439-453, and Julie Anne Plax, *Watteau and the Cultural Politics of Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

tween the two measures of value by introducing the pivotal figure of Theo: Theo represents ambivalence between artistic and commercial success. He acts midway between Vincent with his uncompromising mission on one side and the servile, consumer-pleasing lackeys in their uncle's art gallery on the other. The auction event transposes Theo's position into the year 1987 when artistic appreciation met the competing desires of collectors. They bid for ownership of an oil painting that had reached global recognition and reputation: a vase with flowers, depicted in singular style. How did willingness to pay move from zero to 22.5 million British pounds over the course of a century? Altman's miniseries throws light on the beginning – the painful struggle for valorization – and the end of this process – the expression of collective reputation in a payment for ownership. The slow initial growth of that reputation, decisively shaped by Theo's wife Johanna, by the curator Leclercq and the gallerist Cassirer, remains outside of Altman's scope.

The valuation of the work created by Robert Altman and his "motley crew"<sup>34</sup> follows other patterns than that of singular art objects. Films are not purchased by collectors, but by the many spectators who pay for admission, or for a digital copy. At the time, critics played a major role in selecting those works that were actually chosen by audiences. *Vincent & Theo* marked a turning point in the recognition of Altman's films by the leading American and European film critics. They recognized and appreciated the positioning of the introductory scene, where the continuing bids relayed by the auctioneer provide the background soundtrack for the first dispute between the two brothers, and thus set the tone for the topic of tension between commercial and artistic success. Although ticket sales for the cinema version remained modest, the critics' praise of the film paved the way to the commercial success of Altman's subsequent films, notably *The Player* and *Short Cuts*.

In *Love is in the Bin*, Banksy employs a particularly radical negation of commercial value. The 2006 canvas version of *Girl with Balloon* was surrounded by a thick wooden frame that physically separated it from commercial use, both symbolically and, hidden at the time, even technically. The piece already contained the prerequisites for its eventual realization in Sotheby's auction room. As he recorded and edited his seconds-long performance in a video work, Banksy turned the private auction room into a public site for his destructive act. The result was intended to be worthless on the commercial value scale – a heap of rubbish, and the artistic project would have been completed: "going, going, gone". But the experiment failed, the work remained incomplete. The artwork was not gone from the commercial arena, but gone towards its new owner. Through the performance, the saleroom stunt had become the dominating value asset of the piece. In a climate of interest for the entanglements between traditional collecting in public and private museums on one side and the transactions of globalized art fairs and auction houses, *Love is in the Bin* could be even used for further valorization: it serves as the perfect device to tease out the saleroom-connections of all the artworks with which it was juxtaposed at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

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34 The term has been suggested to characterize the scope of skills in film production by Richard Caves, *Creative Industries. Contracts between Art and Commerce* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

To estimate the artistic value of the series of works using the stencil of *Girl with Balloon* before the 2018 auction, it may be sufficient to quote the accompanying text in the Sotheby's auction catalogue:

With its striking simplicity and raw immediacy, *Girl with Balloon*, 2006, is one of the most widely recognisable images by the anonymous and world renowned artist Banksy... *Girl with Balloon* was voted the nation's favourite artwork in a 2017 poll; a resounding affirmation of the broad and wide reaching popularity of this undeniably iconic and culturally formidable image.<sup>35</sup>

The verbal fireworks were complemented by the catalogue's monetary estimate: 200,000-300,000 British pounds. Actually, the work sold for a total of 1,042,000 British pounds.<sup>36</sup> Due to Banksy's intervention, the work gained worldwide attention in general and social media. There was consensus among art market observers that the half-shredded and retitled work *Love is in the Bin* had even higher resale value. When the new owner consented to the valorizing activities at one of Germany's most reputable art museums, it gave rise to another round of value attributions by those invited to comment on the work and its narrative.

## Further entanglements

Salerooms, be they rooms of display as in art galleries or arenas for the public sale of art objects, mark the place where artistic and monetary quality meet. *Shopsign of Gersaint* demonstrates how luxury objects are sold, and even mutilated, for short-lived sensual pleasure, but are also sold for the long-term enjoyment of those who engage with art. *Vincent & Theo* demonstrates the emphatic distance between the two kinds of valuation, a hundred years before they coincided for a version of *Sunflowers* in the saleroom at Christie's; *Love is in the Bin* demonstrates the inevitability of commercial valuation. All three of them allow their spectators to experience the radical difference between artistic and commercial value, while at the same time making them aware of their parasitic and symbiotic entanglement.

Salerooms, however, show only one part of art markets. The conditions of production as well as the drives that shape consumption remain unnoticed. They would require other forms of representation and conceptualization. Salerooms are also an unlikely conceptual device to show features of political domination. And yet, the three works contain quite explicit references to this sphere of value: In *Shopsign*, the clerks discard the image of the recently deceased "Grand Monarch"<sup>37</sup>; in *Vincent & Theo*, Altman portrays Dr. Gachet as a class-conscious bourgeois who supports artists financially but forbids Vincent's emo-

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35 <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/contemporary-art-evening-auction-l18024/lot.67.html?locale=ja>, visited 4 Feb. 2020.

36 The sum includes the auctioneer's fee.

37 *Au Grand Monarche* was the original name of Gersaint's shop. Cf. Glorieux, *À l'Enseigne*.

tional relationship with his daughter; in Banksy's larger corpus of works, the exposure of political corruption is such a dominant theme that even works without evident political connotation are inevitably read as contributions to his political agenda. A more detailed recognition of the complex entanglements between artistic, commercial and political valorization and valuation would require and merit further study.

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