

Art

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Selling Out

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Trading Up or Selling Out

Mark Harris asks why artists persist in resisting the commodification of their work



As the most energetic aspect of the London art scene, the phenomenon of artist-organised exhibitions sustains a refreshing unpredictability by devising improbable contexts for unusual work.

Other than a few well-established artist-run spaces in Brooklyn, this doesn't happen in New York where credibility and attention are still largely given to commercial galleries. But since these events now appear to form a seamless and uncontentious continuity with their commercial counterparts what are the prospects

for 'alternatives', a concept that seems to have no plausible embodiment under these circumstances?

In so far as the idea of 'alternative' has often meant a critique of commodification, how much has this only been a strategic gesture of resistance, an inflection of the system within which any opposition

.....
Installation 'FLAG'
Clink Wharf, London
Runa Islam
Refuse 1995-96
.....



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.....
Giorgio Sadotti
Dinner 1996

appears firmly entrenched? Do we still have any need for alternatives and do historical examples maintain any credibility (See Julian Stallabrass 'On The Margins' *AM*182)? Is there even any merit in sustaining a critique of commodification when many now successful British artists in the last ten years have colluded with this relentless subsuming of art by commerce?

While accepting the term 'alternative' and establishing what we mean it to be other to, time and again we have seen the 'alternative' collapsing, in a Hegelian sense, into its opposite. In most instances there is no sharp line between what a gallery or museum does and what an artist-curated event achieves. Value is invariably presupposed by the

alternative show and is often thrust on these spaces by public institutions as with 'Life/Live' at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, where the curators, Laurence Bossé and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, offered artist-run ventures curatorial independence within the larger exhibition. Alternative shows are invariably opportunistic; the feel of the casually installed, of the rough edge, acquires a seductive commercial appeal, where the uncommodifiability of an artwork is a feint, ultimately serving the crucial exchange-value of the artist's career. Space Explorations's 'High Rise', featuring installations in a Euston Road tower block, was a memorable example of this economy. If an 'alternative' hasn't the means to supplant its *other* then it is only a part of that other.

Other alternatives come to mind including the collective insanity of the series of preludes to 'Euthanasia', the final show at Plummet. These deeply alienating events tested the endurance and tolerance of an audience obliged to sit through an actor-priest's one-hour sermon or the unannounced screening of an entire von Sternberg movie. There were David Hammons's unpublicised installations at

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the Tribeca shop, Knobkerry, in 1994, where his works had to be discerned from among the ethnographic objects on sale, and Erik Oppenheim's 1991 New York show, 'Home for June', where the visitor saw only projected slides of work that was walled up, out of sight, in the same space. Giorgio Sadotti's ambiguously sycophantic dinner party recently shown at Cubitt Gallery where artists served food and artwork to a table of dealers, critics and editors nevertheless showed a perverse way forward. Most interesting of all perhaps are the long-running events at Four Walls in Brooklyn where a one-evening Sunday exhibition is the basis for a discussion of issues raised by that work. At the end of the debate the show is taken down. If, as these examples imply, the possibility still exists for an unfamiliar axis to exhibitions, is this a useful standard with which to judge other curatorial projects or does it only mask deeper problems of commodification and value?

From earlier texts written to accompany curated exhibitions Peter Lewis, who also curated 'FLAG' in a space on Clink Street (one of the more interesting group shows in London last year which even showed a healthy irreverence towards the nationalist bandwagon of Brit art by its ironic title and by its inclusion of non British-based artists), often returns to Guy Debord's ideas on commodification and resistance in *The Society of the Spectacle*. The implication is that the works, the curatorial projects as a whole, are effective in demonstrating alternatives to the commodification of artworks or, at the very least, that they highlight the problem. There is little that escapes commodification, the terms of which would include this essay and by now Debord's ideas as well. Jean Baudrillard's early text, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, configured as a response to the Situationists' relative optimism about resistance, insists that we are past any time when ideology, political economy, psychoanalysis and dialectics held out hope for altering material existence. Instead, whatever revolution they initiated has by now been consumed by a system that only holds these beliefs up as models of revolution, drained of any further meaning other than the iconic. His pessimism grants power to an entirely different order that he calls 'code', whether genetic or digital, that absorbs and reverses the effects of any subversions: 'Is there a theory or a practice which is subversive because it is more aleatory than the system itself, an indeterminate subversion which would be to the order of the code what the revolution was to the order of political economy? Can we fight DNA? Certainly not by means of the class struggle.'¹

The artwork chases the mechanical hare of anti-commodification that it can never catch, and must for its validity never catch, since its *raison d'être* depends on maintaining this fiction of the chase.

Things may not be this bleak but the caution is valid. Commodification is less relevant than we imagined since the thought that thinks 'commodity' is itself subsumed by the system, is itself a product of what it critiques, of what it is allowed to critique. The artwork chases the mechanical hare of anti-commodification that it can never catch, and must for its validity never catch, since its *raison d'être* depends on maintaining this fiction of the chase.

If some artwork is not immediately commodifiable, such as an installation or a live piece like Tracey Emin's events, then we can be sure that for us to have heard about it at all it must be anticipating commodities to come or adding validation to commodities already owned. This neither discredits nor sums up all that an artwork achieves but is merely the parallel circumstance of art. What is it about the need to keep addressing this lost cause of resisting commodification? Is it just the drive to broaden the limited arena within which artists can claim authenticity in a ceremony of repositioning one's work on the boardgame of commodification when the entire board is fixed deep within an economic structure? How do we divert the desire to find a value for artworks by any available means, including the status of being alternative and against commodification?

The assertion of particular values for art can seem redundant in an economy where most commodities have long converted such qualities into the mere appearance of value. This is the use-value we imagine and desire in any commodity before ownership and this is where products that have lost any conceivable value re-invent the appearance of one; it is the area in which advertising works and one method by which art appeals to us. It is what Wolfgang Haug calls 'semblance-value'² and Debord intends to describe by his terms 'spectacle' or 'pseudo-need'.³

In time the apparent values of many products supersede and displace any use-values they may once have had. This is the field for Bank's entertaining representations of the hopeless and

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Tim Noble &
Sue Webster
Entrance to Whatever
1996

Objectors to commodification believe there is some ground outside this system from which to launch their critique yet even human resources fail to evade the commodity-structure which is so pervasive ...

irredeemable, where meaningless suggestions of value are endlessly juggled as if to deflect any assertions of intent or assumptions of worth. In Haug's analysis, the need for the product has been transferred to its empty semblance which may promise enhancements of status, aesthetic variety or sexual advantage but no conventional use-value. When artists, or Debord for that matter, speak of commodities it seems to be this illusion that they find most objectionable in its apparent manipulateness and deceit. Yet it is clear that art is greatly served by, or even becomes, this illusion of the 'new' and 'alternative' whose attractiveness renders tediously obsolete any search for underlying values.

There is an audience complicity here that any critique of the commodity must acknowledge; commodities are anticipated in some manner by our

desire which they must in turn mirror. Objectors to commodification believe there is some ground outside this system from which to launch their critique yet even human resources fail to evade the commodity-structure which is so pervasive that all industries, including service industries, of which 'alternative' group shows are a part, are within its sway. If artists claim a resistance to this system they deserve our scepticism for it is not clear how art might achieve its miraculous escape from the primary level of commodification – its availability as a purchasable item with use and exchange values – nor from what it is especially vulnerable to, the secondary level of semblance-value.

Art objects, like commodities, project the appearance of value. Like commodities, they reflect, and still more profoundly anticipate, our desire for stimulus and renewal, providing the means for that desire to be expressed. The recent 'Special Offer' show in London, a shop display including work by Tim Noble & Sue Webster, Julie Jones and others, short-circuited access to such a desire by offering some of the tackiest, most under-invested products – styrofoam cappuccinos, tinned food relabelled to read 'British Rubbish' and stuffed toys in the form of knitted sperm.

That this may be all it does, that the artwork's



imaging and thwarting of desire might be the closest it gets to having a use-value, makes the work more abstract but no less a commodity. That the artwork can engage a spectator's desire at arm's length, without needing to be possessed, is its contradiction of the commodity structure, but it achieves this through the same mechanism as other commodities, by making its apparent use-value into use-value itself, giving scopophilic and intellectual satisfaction. The artwork operates entirely within the framework of commodity economics but this condition, from which it cannot ultimately escape, is nevertheless one location for the potential complexity and interest of an artwork.

Both 'FLAG' and 'Special Offer', in which much of the work courted exhaustion of resources, of craft, of conceptual investment, of authorship, as a strategy for knocking the appearance of value on the head, still represent economic negotiations on the outer circles of the code currently determining art produc-

tion and exhibition. It is still a long way from attaining a sustainable idea of a non-relational position closer to Hegel's concept of absolute difference, the 'simple not'⁴. This is a *not* that doesn't negate anything outside itself and so manages to elude being negated in turn. The question of how that might be embodied in such a show, aside from in individual pieces, is the question at the root of the idea of 'alternative' – if only it could work itself free from the intractable fix of anti-commodification. ■

1. Jean Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death', 1967, translated by Ian Hamilton Grant, SAGE Publications, 1993.
2. Wolfgang Iser, 'Commodity Aesthetics, Ideology and Culture', translated International General, 1987.
3. Guy Debord, 'Society of the Spectacle', 1967, translated Black and Red, 1970.
4. Hegel, 'Science of Logic', p417, translated by J. N. Findlay, Humanities Press International, 1969.

Mark Harris is an artist.

Installation 'FLAG'
Clink Wharf, London
Justine Daf
Storage: making lists
1996

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