

Week3-Distractions Beyond the Frame: The Game Between Art and Money



Recently I visited The Atelier gallery's latest featured exhibition—*Transient Moments: The City, The Sky, and the Space Between*. As I viewed the artwork, the price tag beside it immediately disrupted my experience. I was jarred out of my appreciation of the painting and instinctively began judging whether the piece was worth the price listed.



Fee Dickson Reid, *Iridescent*, 76 × 76 cm. The Atelier Gallery. Photograph by Anqi Li, 31 January 2026.

This experience brought me to a theoretical crossroads. I encountered two distinct voices in the paper.

On the one hand, John A. Walker (1987, pp. 26–30) contends that works of art possess both a non-commodity cognitive dimension and commodity attributes, neither of which is mutually exclusive. Walker analyzed the commodity characteristics of artworks through Marx's "dual nature of commodities" in *Capital*, elucidating their use value and exchange value. From this perspective, the price tags beside artworks make their value transparent, acknowledging their commercial worth.

On the other hand, Stewart Martin (2007, pp. 15–25) presents a dialectical counterargument. Drawing on Adorno's theory, he critically contends that the autonomy of artworks is a product of capitalist commodity forms, yet the "uselessness" of artworks creates a contradiction with the logic of a commodity's exchange value. Martin believes that the core of "The Absolute Artwork" lies in its rejection of any practical function or utility value. Therefore, the price tag displayed beside the painting reveals the work's exchange value, thereby diminishing the artwork's autonomy to some degree.

In my view, I cannot resolutely endorse either side's perspective. Art exhibitions require market support, as financial revenue can reduce cost pressures. Yet curators must simultaneously uphold the integrity and critical nature of art.

When this question is applied to my curatorial project on “witches,” it becomes particularly acute. Silvia Federici (2021, p.193) argues that the witch hunts were part of the process of capitalist primitive accumulation, with witches serving as victims oppressed by the capitalist system. Therefore, I don’t want to see feminist artworks that depict female trauma become overly commercialized. However, if I completely disregard curatorial considerations and the commercial value of artworks, it could lead to the exhibition’s costs spiraling out of control.

Therefore, I believe this is not simply a matter of “commercial versus non-commercial.” As a curator, I need to explore a relatively balanced state that preserves the artistic value of the work while also considering its commercial value.

The eye-catching price tag made me realize how fragile this balance is. For my project, I currently cannot arrive at a definitive answer. But I recognize this is an issue worthy of attention, and I will continue to explore this topic in my future studies.

Bibliography

Federici, S. (2021) *Caliban and the witch : women, the body and primitive accumulation*. London: Penguin Books. [online]. Available from: <https://www.vlebooks.com/product/openreader?id=Edinburgh&accId=9137656&isbn=9780141998251>.

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