Art and anthropology: Twenty-five years of *The Traffic in Culture*

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Abstract
Special issue introduction.

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“This painting is a masterpiece!” says the blond *femme fatale*, reassuring her square-jawed boyfriend of the coming acclaim from “all of New York.” This deceptively breezy faux-comic, immediately recognizable as Roy Lichtenstein’s 1962 *Masterpiece*, appeared on the cover and set the tone for *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. This collection of essays was edited by George Marcus and Fred Myers and published a little more than twenty-five years ago. The Lichtenstein image pithily articulates the volume’s double goal: to demystify the art world’s production of value while arguing for its importance as an ethnographic site. This special issue examines the impact of their approach on the contemporary study of art in shifting geopolitical, cultural and economic fields, as well as the challenges that this field and its protagonists continue to offer both in and outside of the discipline of anthropology.

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The Traffic in Culture begins with essays from anthropologists of art that go beyond the discipline’s long-standing practice of translating between differing aesthetic regimes to look at the systems for art’s circulation and value production. Then, in a series of essays collected from scholars living near New York, the volume takes the metropolitan art world as its object, highlighting its integration in political, social, and economic life. By “casting a light on mediation itself”, Marcus and Myers (1995) powerfully undermined two common, if conflicting assumptions: one, that art’s value transcends the social; and, two, that pointing out the circumstances of its production causes art to lose its authenticity, or genuine status as culture. Importantly, argue Marcus and Myers, it is markets that, “have destroyed any illusion, perhaps crucial to the historic formation in modern times of the category of art itself, that its discourse on cultural aesthetics value could be autonomous” (1995: 21). Overall, The Traffic in Culture was motivated by a desire to situate anthropology within the histories, systems of knowledge, and networks of institutions that constitute the art world, rather than hold out the possibility that anthropological knowledge about art could be autonomous from the conditions of art’s production, circulation, and exhibition.

Among the most important scholarly projects in the volume’s wake was the set of monographs published in the Duke University Press Objects/Histories series, edited by anthropologist Nicholas Thomas, which includes Myers’ own book on Aboriginal painting (2002). Like Traffic, Thomas’ series was deliberately interdisciplinary in scope, carving out a space between anthropology and art history where much of the work on contemporary art worlds has come to be sited. Around the same time, the wider discipline of art history began to chart the ideological underpinnings of a newly expansive and accelerating political economy of art (e.g. Kapur 2000; Smith et al. 2009; cf. Guilbaut 1985). Soon thereafter, the field of art history began to contend with a new, separate discipline of curatorial studies that explicitly critiques the art world even as it offers expertise in its practices (e.g. Rattemeyer et al. 2010 and aligned volumes; Filipovic 2010).

In the twenty-five years since Traffic was published, the art sector has continued to expand quickly, with scholars rushing to understand the proliferation of its geographic, social, and symbolic formations. Marcus and Myers looked to art because of its implication in power, arguing that “art discourse and art production are very close to significant instrumentalities—large vectors of power and money—from which anthropology is relatively distant” (1995: 26). That distance has somewhat collapsed, with the rise of grant culture and patronage systems that facilitate anthropological endeavors, especially in the Euro-American academy. Even if the money-power nexus operates differently in the two fields, any “re-alignment” of art and anthropology would necessitate a fresh assessment of its role in their modes of inquiry and representation. And yet, despite their extraordinary growth, art worlds and their primary actors and institutions have attracted surprisingly little attention as “field sites” among scholars working under the banner of anthropology and sociology (important exceptions include Fillitz 2014; Geismar 2001, 2004, 2013; Kompatsiaris 2017; Winegar 2006; and Velthuis 2007 among others). One can speculate about the forces that have shaped this lack, from the retreat of state funding for the arts in the US, already well underway by the time that Traffic was published; to the new attention garnered by anthropology’s more
“interventionist” subfields (medical and political anthropology, for example); to the divergent traditions of North American and the British and continental anthropology (see Ciotti 2020). For whatever reason, scholarly production on art worlds remains relatively slow within anthropology itself.

The Traffic in Culture mainly speaks about and to Western art worlds—Lichtenstein’s New York is the volume’s imaginative center. But Marcus and Myers also mention “the recent fascination of the art world with the “appropriation” of value-producing activity on an international scale, with the assimilation of the “art” of the Third and Fourth World societies anthropologists have traditionally studied” (1995: 4). That statement proved to be prophetic, for the volume anticipated a genuine sea change in the art world. Across the 1990s, as economies in Eastern Europe and Asia “opened,” art became an object of financial and imaginative investment and the art world gradually lost its center-periphery structure. The intervening decades have seen the emergence of art market epicenters in Asia and a growing interest in contemporary art from Africa both in and outside of the continent. The simultaneous proliferation of biennales, museums and galleries around the world, along with the concomitant circulation of art works, artists and curatorial professionals, necessitates new approaches and methods of study that are able to capture these trends. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s analysis in Traffic (1995) of the 1990 Los Angeles Festivals of the Arts understands the event as both an extension of the World’s fair and as similar to people’s encounter with avant-garde, highlighting “confusing pleasures” emerging from visitors looking at something they do not understand. Such experiences—in which audiences around the world are presented with material for which they lack cultural reference points—are now commonplace. In response to the proliferation of art-related activities and events/festivals within the Global South, a focus on art infrastructures (Zitzewitz 2017, 2022) or on the circulation of cultural forms such as biennales, art fairs and auction houses (Ciotti 2014) are just two emergent methodologies for reimagining the art world as an ethnographic site. The study of these dynamics requires cognizance of the powerful dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that shape discourses of value, including both curatorial writing and the operations of the market valuation.

This special issue is predicated upon the effects of a relentless expansion of market and display spaces—the contemporary “traffic in culture”—supported by new visual and financial regimes, but nevertheless subject to circumstances like the 2008 financial crisis and the ongoing pandemic. Within these regimes, Lichtenstein’s Masterpiece continues to speak about the large vectors of power and money mentioned above, but with a twist. In 2017, the painting was sold by art collector and philanthropist Agnes Gund for the whopping sum of $165 million with the aim to generate fund towards criminal justice reform and address the trend of mass incarceration in the USA (Pogrebin 2017). This gesture was inspired by Gund’s concern for her African-American grandchildren and the endurance of White supremacy in the country (Pogrebin 2017). Thus, a classic story of wealth circulation—in which the production of value within the art world remains as closely related to the media regimes of popular culture as it was when Lichtenstein painted—can be re-read through the lens of the painting’s white protagonists placed at the service of the fight against racial injustice.
Even if the latest episode in *Masterpiece*’s social life points to the recalcitrance of White hegemony, today a book with a similar aim as *The Traffic in Culture* would have the performance of diversity—a feature of contemporary art worlds—as its very starting point. Such a volume might feature on its cover the work of Danh Vo, whose assemblage of historical artifacts from U.S. intervention in Vietnam was exhibited in the Guggenheim Museum and forms the subject of Nora Taylor’s article for this issue. While remaining within the New York art world, Taylor foregrounds the ascendance of diverse actors and the challenges they pose to its assumptions. A specialist in Vietnamese art known for championing ethnographic methods within art history, Taylor explores Danh Vo’s practice of the incorporation of historical “ready-made-like” objects as art works and the ensuing effects on representation. Returning to Hal Foster’s celebrated essay, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” which appeared in *Traffic in Culture*, Taylor confronts Foster’s image of the Western artist-subject from the standpoint of Vo, a former refugee turned into art-star. She argues that Vo returns the gaze of the “other” discussed in Foster’s essay through the excavation of global material archives, an ethnographic sensibility and personal life’s archeology. Taylor re-traces the journey of appropriation out of which Danh Vo creates his art works from family heirlooms and objects closely connected to US-Vietnam history that he buys at auction. Under the compulsion to deploy intimate details of family history, visual and material, in line with so many art works arising from the Global South, the self turns public and the personal becomes a global concern.

A critique of appropriation is at the center of Karin Zitzewitz’s article, which focuses on a collaborative project among Mumbai-based artist Navjot Altaf and rural Adivasi (indigenous) artists. Noting the coincidence of *Traffic in Culture*’s publication and this artist collaboration, she traces the project from the late-1990s into the following decade as an attempt to bridge immense social divisions. The emergent artist-run NGO, Dialogue Interactive Artists Association (DIAA), began to use artistic methods to address village-level infrastructure while joining networks for the circulation of art and craft. Aligned with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s call to understand the not-readily-intelligible within artistic performance, and following *Traffic in Culture*’s devices to locate difference in shifting art worlds, Zitzewitz examines the conjuncture between particular socio-economic and political conditions in India and global art world trends. In this case, the traffic in culture is found in the merger of social and artistic practice, of spaces and categories, and of private and public networks across metropolitan and development-regimented worlds to which the resignification of both art and everyday life objects follows.

The agency and knowledge of previously provincialized actors are equally central to Ruth Phillips’ article, which places decolonization at the center of her consideration of the traffic between art and anthropology. Touching on material discussed by anthropologist Molly Mullin in *The Traffic in Culture*, as well as the wider concerns of the volume, Ruth Phillips examines *Anishinaabe: Art and Power*, a recent exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum that was guest curated by Anishinaabe historian Alan Corbiere and artist Saul Williams. Phillips contextualizes their curatorial efforts to rethink representation within the “transformational period in settler-Indigenous relations” that has followed the 2015 Report of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She argues that public debate within and among Indigenous and settler communities has superseded the still unresolved
efforts to make art history and anthropology “converge.” Charting the subsequent retreat from such efforts observable in visual studies and visual anthropology, she argues that Indigenous Studies—and the curatorial strategies set in motion in the above exhibition—renders the attempted convergence efforts “moot.” The newer disciplinary formation shifts attention to the ways indigenous curation moves the museum space beyond a mere token representation by employing indigenous epistemic categories. Phillips describes Anishinaabe: Art and Power as part of a wider decolonial strategy in which indigenous thought counters the longstanding institutional approaches of settler society.

The special issue contributors find their disciplinary home in art history, even as they engage with issues of ethics, politics, and the constitution of culture that have traditionally been the purview of anthropology. All also use ethnographic methods, affecting debates in the swiftly growing independent subfields of North American indigenous, Southeast Asian, and South Asian contemporary art history. Marcus and Myers did not originally envision the effect their intervention would have on art history as a discipline, focusing instead on the potential for critical ethnography in contemporary art worlds. The special issue’s final contribution, an interview with George Marcus and Fred Myers conducted by Zitzewitz and Ciotti, reflects upon the volume’s legacy in the editors’ individual scholarly trajectories and in the field at large. With admirable frankness, the editors capture their different roles in spearheading debates around the rethinking of anthropological representation, the refocusing of ethnography and the anthropology of art. They touch on questions ranging from what Zitzewitz and Ciotti call “the will to collaborate,” to the diversity in agency within the art world since the publication of Traffic, to the manner in which the two fields collaborate, intersect or “get in each other’s way.” The interview ends with a potentially liberating proposition regarding the categories of art and anthropology: perhaps, Marcus and Myers suggest, the prolific exchange between the two is now so accepted that it no longer needs to be classified, but rather only practiced or performed. A powerful exemplification of this is Marcus’ ruminations on the corpus of his fieldnotes mentioned at the end of the interview—that, in this context, turns into an unintentional aesthetic project of an anthropologist’s life. There may be no need to speak about where this project falls into, art or anthropology.

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Note

1. Our special issue follows closely upon conversations that occurred at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Conference, “Art, Materiality, and Representation”, held in London in June 2018. Ruth Phillips’s article in this issue, which was originally delivered as a keynote at the above conference, was the immediate inspiration for the special issue. All essays reconsider key contributions to the volume.

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