

eVery Day
Culture, Collecting
and Desire

eBay

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**The Contradictory Circulation
of Fine Art and Antiques on eBay**

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The fine art and antiques sector of the economy has long been dominated by nineteenth-century patriarchal business practices and high-end auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's. In this chapter I argue that eBay has helped effect a set of democratizing shifts in this sector. As a technological assemblage, eBay provides for a new form of commerce that opens up certain social possibilities even as it forecloses others, and I point to contradictions between democratic notions of "community" and how eBay's language of "community" operates discursively within what is essentially a site for commercial transactions based on free-market libertarian "ethics." eBay's Feedback Forum system instills a form of seemingly transparent community self-governance that obviates the need for eBay the corporation to regulate and monitor transactions closely (see chapter 7). Transparency and its implied qualities of trust and social bond underwrite eBay, a setting where business transactions take place as an open expression of supply, demand, and evaluation. eBay thus exemplifies a new economic efficiency at work, one where flows of goods between buyers and sellers bypass costly intermediaries who once monopolized access, stock, and expertise.

As I detail below, eBay has enabled a move away from corporate intermediaries such as Sotheby's and Christie's and their traditional social filters based on elite assumptions about gender-, race- and class-based forms of social relations. Email as a direct yet impersonal form of communication and the anonymity afforded by eBay user IDs play an important role in the erosion of gender and class barriers in the fine art and antiques market. eBay also offers an almost immediate market access previously unavailable in the bricks-and-mortar international art market of old, and it has aided the flourishing of the fine art and antiques sector outside of older metropolitan centers. eBay's democratizing influences are complex, and I examine eBay in

relation to the rise and fall of other internet auction houses such as the former Sothebys.com and the role of internet research sites such as Artnet.com and Artfact.com. This account highlights the culture of traditional auction houses and shows how eBay has influenced bricks-and-mortar businesses. I also assess how eBay's democratizing influences work differently for buyers and sellers. I bring to this study my academic training in visual cultural and gender studies and my insider's knowledge as a seller on eBay of fine art and antiques.

To examine the complex changes that working for an online auction house brings to the embodied experience of these workers, I draw from my ethnographic research conducted with a small group of individuals working for a woman-owned American company selling fine art and antiques on eBay. The company started business on eBay in May 2000 and was a Sothebys.com associate from May 2001 until Sothebys.com's demise in February 2003. Through its association with Sothebys.com and eBay, the company quadrupled sales between 2000 and 2005.

SOCIAL CLASS, EBAY, AND BRICKS-AND-MORTAR AUCTION HOUSES

Given eBay's populist founding myth that it was built on trading Beanie Babies and Pez dispensers and on message board chatter, it seemed unlikely there would ever have developed much of a connection between the world of fine art and antiques and the online auction site. But the record shows that the eBay community bought and sold both popular culture and fine art and antiques since eBay's inception. Indeed, collecting communities and art and antique dealers were among the earliest and most enthusiastic posters to the discussion boards on eBay's predecessor site, AuctionWeb. As Pongo, one of AuctionWeb's more famous characters, explained, "[A] lot of the early users were retired antiques dealers who could barely turn on their computers."¹ It was in part because of the strong presence of these individuals on eBay that in April 1999, at the peak of the U.S. dot.com boom, eBay bought Butterfield & Butterfield, a well-known West Coast auction house, for 260 million USD. eBay then launched "Great Collections," the firm's Web portal entry for selling high-end art and antiques consigned to Butterfield & Butterfield. In January of the same year, Sotheby's, the international auction house, announced it would spend 25 million USD to start Sothebys.com, and a few months later it unveiled the joint venture SothebysAmazon.com. In June 2002 Sothebys.com also initiated a collaboration with eBay, and while this alliance lasted only one year it had more lasting influence on

the art and antiques business than is commonly acknowledged: the alliance demonstrated the viability of sites such as eBay for buyers and sellers of fine art and antiques, particularly in the low- to mid-level price range.²

Though these early online ventures were influential in many ways, a significant reason for their failure—including that of eBay's Great Collections, unsuccessfully rebranded as "eBay Premiere" in January 2001—to secure a niche within the high-end fine art and antiques market lies in the fact that the economic efficiency that online auctions offer is less valued in this market than in others. In the words of Sotheby's chronicler, Robert Lacey:

When people buy at Sotheby's, they are seeking to satisfy a variety of needs. They may explain their motives in terms of taste, or history or sentiment, but they are laying out their money fundamentally in hopes of acquiring something that can bring a new dimension to their lives. They are bidding for class. The ostentatious and insecure are seeking to validate themselves in the eyes of others. The passionate collector is driven by the quasi-spiritual impulse to possess beauty. But all are making their purchase in pursuit of some extra validation for themselves.³

The experience of bidding in a high-end auction house cannot be duplicated online. The interpersonal dynamics peculiar to the kind of internet commerce championed by eBay make it harder to engage in the personalized face-to-face chit-chat through which personalities and social attributes become manifest in live auctions. Sotheby's management had difficulty distinguishing between and providing for the differing needs of the face-to-face side of its traditional business and the new cultural demands faced by the dot.com venture. Management applied Sotheby's long-standing practices of expensive banquets, lavish pampering of clients, and heavy spending on marketing to its far less lucrative dot.com business. The abundance of spending on the internet department itself was evident through the uncharacteristically high salaries for its tech and marketing employees and large sums spent on print ads in venues such as the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. This aggressive spending on marketing, particularly in the beginning, was seen as a way to lure high profile art and antique dealers to become participants in the Sothebys.com online venture through the inclusion of dealer property in expensive dot.com advertisements. Another rationale for its aggressive investment in marketing was to set itself ahead of the competition, particularly against the rival auction house Christie's, who initially considered starting its own online venture but eventually changed course and decided against it.

On eBay, clients as well as businesses are not so easily coded through appearance, age, education, class, or gender as they are in traditional auction settings. In general, online interactions tend to be less hierarchical and in theory promote diversity in an online organization's culture. One of the most commented upon advantages of the internet is the depersonalization of interlocutors through their assumption of online screen names. On eBay the ability of buyers and sellers to use anonymous user IDs can allow for a less inhibited presentation of self; however, sellers must adhere more strictly to traditional codes of ethics premised on a unitary, professional self. Nevertheless, email introduces compensatory advantages—sellers read correspondence and respond to it when ready. This can reduce the pressures of aggressive or manipulative telephone and face-to-face conversations, particularly those dealing with issues of price.

eBay's more democratic example inspired the organization of Sothebys.com. According to one woman interviewed for this project, Sothebys.com was more innovative than Sotheby's bricks-and-mortar operation in limiting hierarchical differences and reducing formalities among employees. Sothebys.com practiced more open hiring practices and promoted and rewarded younger employees, including women, who were not from the same high-elite social class from which the traditional firm recruited many of its employees. Sotheby.com's Content and IT employees were all under thirty, largely middle class, and paid at least double the salary of staff members whose positions did not require specialized skills or experience.⁴ The company also took the (then) unusual step of training international dealers in how to sell their inventory on its site. This less centralized model of shared expertise and initiative comes closer to an eBay business model than what one would usually associate with an elite auction house.

The pressures of ongoing lawsuits at Sotheby's⁵ and overspending on customer relations at its online division (already 100 million USD in debt) forced the firm to terminate its joint venture with eBay in February 2003.⁶ Sotheby's minimized its internet presence and refocused on live auctions of valuable fine art and antiques. In the wake of this collapse, smaller internet-based fine art and antiques businesses and U.S.-based regional auction houses that had been important to eBay from the beginning acquired greater market shares of internet-based fine art and antiques sales. Yet this period was short-lived, as many of the medium- to large-sized established auction houses such as Doyle's and Swann's resumed their internet presence through eBay live auctions—a hybrid format combining live auction and internet-based sales.

THE ROLE OF ONLINE ART RESEARCH SITES

Art-related sites such as Artnet.com, Askart.com, Artprice.com, and Artfact.com that survived the dot.com crash repositioned themselves as research and advertising sites. They remain significant online presences and exert enormous influence on the way fine art and antiques are bought, sold, and valued. While subscribing to these services can be costly (especially to Artfact.com and Artnet.com), they have been a great leveler in providing access to expertise, standardized information and pricing, images, and auction records for listed artists and decorative arts that were previously available only through very expensive reference books. In certain ways, these sites actually provide more information since online auction records often feature digitized color images of the object, a feature less economically feasible in book-based auction records. Websites such as Artnet.com have become important mechanisms internationally for determining prices in a more detailed and direct way, and they enable individuals located outside of metropolitan centers with the best public art libraries to access the same information as experts working for major auction houses or museums. These sites, combined with the eBay search engine of completed auction listings and search engines such as Google, have made the internet essential for researching the history of fine art and antiques.

Sites such as Artnet.com and Artfact.com have also given workers in online fine art and antiques businesses an edge over clients. In some cases, this is because employees are more adept at Web-based research than clients, who often are less comfortable with computers and lack the skills to use sites such as Artnet.com properly and on a regular basis. Thus, knowledge and confidence gained through using these sites have opened up commercial and social possibilities for women and a younger generation of eBay sellers of fine art and antiques. Another advantage for these sellers is eBay's provision of access to an international fine art and antiques virtual marketplace that bypasses costly antique fairs and auction houses and that gives customers who are located anywhere and have Web access the means to buy and sell across spatially dispersed markets. This is significant since following the decline in value of the U.S. dollar relative to other major currencies, U.S.-based objects have become cheaper to acquire for foreign buyers and eBay businesses located anywhere in the United States now benefit from access to national and international clientele. Indeed, many regionally based American auction houses that simultaneously conduct live and eBay-based auctions now claim that their sales are international as well. An examination of networked art auctions therefore reveals that the work involved links people globally in a virtual space of international commerce. eBay

and the internet have facilitated the rise of smaller firms selling fine art and antiques. Because such firms are more horizontal in their organizational structure than older firms such as Sotheby's they can be seen as maintaining aspects of the myth of eBay as the quintessential American small town writ virtual, built on word of mouth, and sustained by people's feelings of belonging.

SELLERS, INVISIBLE LABOR, AND COSTS OF EBAY

Despite the desirable democratic possibilities for which eBay has allowed, many of the above-noted technological and social changes in the way commerce is conducted on eBay have taken place at considerable cost to sellers. While the internet's technological structure helps foster the illusion of costless reproductions and instantaneous sales, the labor entailed in listing an object on eBay in a highly professional way and completing an internet transaction is enormous. To compensate for buyers' inability to personally examine an object before purchase, many serious online sellers provide very detailed cataloging information including extensive condition reports and photographs. Requisite skills range from expertise in photography to fine art cataloging, research, writing condition reports, expertise with computers, and shipping and packing, among others. These practices of cataloging and photography follow those of older art catalogs produced by bricks-and-mortar auction houses, but often include greater detail, including biographies of artists, four to six photographs per item, and extensive condition reports. While the form of these descriptions may not be innovative, a crucial difference is the amount of labor involved, part of it in producing the seemingly effortless transparency required in online selling and achieved in part through the labor required to provide more detailed cataloging information.

Just as issues of labor get erased from eBay's discourse of friction-free ease, myths about eBay's "community" and democratic structure tend to occlude issues of costs, particularly those incurred by sellers who must pay listing fees whether or not their item sells.⁷ Conflict lying just beneath the surface of this myth is seen in message board discussions of eBay's fee structures: eBay's transaction fees are considerable if one consistently sells hundreds or thousands of items at one time. For high-volume or high-value sellers, transaction fees can equal the cost of retail space rental in major metropolitan areas, and any fee change has a fairly large impact. It should be noted, however, that since fine art and antiques dealers typically use eBay to supplement their bricks-and-mortar businesses, eBay fee increases

frequently are not considered high relative to, for example, fees for participating in live art and antiques fairs. Nevertheless, since eBay remains understood as a site for bargains (versus art and antiques fairs, where objects sell at full retail price), fee-related costs, advertising included, remain contentious for many eBay sellers, particularly those with relatively low profit margins. A central concern related to fee increases is that there is little competition from any comparable auction site. This exposes all smaller sellers, such as those employing a small number of individuals working in basements, garages, or spare rooms in a house, to arbitrary fee changes: eBay's democratizing influence, then, should be understood in relation to the size of a seller's business and her or his ability to survive changes in market conditions, fee increases included.

GENDER AND CLASS IN INTERNET-BASED FINE ART AND ANTIQUES SALES

The size or scale of a business is an issue of particular importance to women in the field. Female employees at a woman-owned fine art and antiques eBay-linked business pointed out the difference between eBay small businesses with ample staffs and those with one or two employees. These women indicated that the larger the staff, the less isolated they felt when dealing with aggressive or harassing clients, most of whom were older men. One way these employees dealt with harassment was to post egregious client email in a public place such as the bathroom door and have other staff comment on them publicly. Such correspondence would range from the mildly flirtatious to outright condensation and hostility. These oftentimes gendered forms of aggression would manifest themselves when a buyer objected to an object's sale price, when he was buying fine art somewhat erotic in nature, or if the object arrived damaged or was lost. In certain ways, this continued the patriarchal social relations of the male-dominated fine art and antiques business. Regardless of an individual's sexual orientation or gender makeup, the structure of the communication situation remains presumptively heteronormative and heterosexual, and those with less power are feminized and discursively positioned as passive (even in those situations where aggressive email originates from women buyers). Further complicating these exchanges is the fact that, of the employees I interviewed, most have more formal education than their clients. Clients often hail from rather complex class positions; though they may operate within a very elite world of collectors, museums, connoisseurs, and high art, they are not always of that world and were not born into it.