The Avant-Garde and the Market

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Ein Kunstwerk von mir verstehen, heißt es zu kaufen
(To understand a piece of my artwork is to buy it)
– Anonymous German artist, c.1985

During the post-war era, a period sometimes labelled “late modern”, the early twentieth century’s avant-garde movements were regarded as a series of outspoken and fierce acts of resistance to the commodification of culture and to the levelling of cultural hierarchies – in short, to the whole complexity of social mechanisms known as the “market.” Although recent scholarship has attempted to move beyond this Manichean concept, such analyses still exert a pervasive influence on the rather tortuous relations between the theory and practice of contemporary art and its economic substructure. “Art and the market” is an alloy that many reject on moral grounds; it also generates a kind of writing that thrives on the frisson produced by the outlandish excesses of the art world. But more fundamentally, it can also serve as a springboard for historical-critical reflections on the idea of “aesthetic autonomy” – and sometimes also engender new practices that actively incorporate economic sub- or infrastructures into the work itself and thus into the artistic process. From Duchamp through conceptual art to contemporary ideas of the artwork as “service”, “intervention” and “social trigger” one could trace a history of strategies for using the market as leverage, in which the work becomes increasingly integrated into systems that are at once symbolic, aesthetic, and economic. The key question, not only from the point of view of historiography, but also with respect to how we judge our present situation, is this: Does this process amount to a
loss of critical potential (and hence a regrettable surrender to consumer society), or might it in fact result in new definitions of practice with respect to an altered, but not necessarily deleterious, situation?

It has often been noted that the development of modern art runs parallel to the rapid expansion of commodity trading during the nineteenth century. This is confirmed, rather than contradicted, by the fervent resistance put up by many early modernists opposed to industrial capital and its colonisation of the everyday world. As commodification is increasingly seen to define an artefact’s status, lending it a new societal mobility, opposition to this development grows. The idea of aesthetic autonomy, or of the work in itself as a hermetic and self-referential reality (a notion rooted in Kant’s philosophy, crystallised only in the late nineteenth century), may be seen as a complex reaction: it is only by internalising, paradoxically, the commodity form, or by its becoming an absolute fetish, that the work may avoid the humiliation of being subjected to the external and fluctuating evaluation of the market.

A clear indication of this social mobility, and of the resulting destabilisation of taste, might be located in the shifting functions of the Salon system. Its roots lead as far back as the late seventeenth century, although the social role now ascribed to it dates from the mid-eighteenth century, when it became a space in which a particular form of discourse – art criticism – developed in conjunction with a freshly active spectatorial role. The Salon exercised such influence on and authority over artistic matters that many artists wanted to close it down; throughout its history it maintained capricious relationships to political power and to the Academy, forming, moreover, a precondition for the emergent art market. Significantly, a backlash against the tradition epitomised by the Academy mutated into a conflict around the status of the Salon, from the first battle between Romanticism and Classicism (symbolised by Delacroix and Ingres) onwards.

The salons were subject to constant reorganisation, the sponsors shifted; above all, the jury system was rigorously questioned. The rapid and unprecedented breakdown of artistic criteria pitted successive generations of artists against each other: the most vitriolic attacks often came from older artists who perceived a challenge to their authority. The complexity of this process, where the locus of authority was by no means certain, is exemplified by the split be-