The Private Collection: Aura, the Cult of Celebrity and, the construct of Value in saleable works of art.

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Abstract

A tenet of the twenty-first century is the monetisation of everything due to commercialisation. The effects of this commercialisation have crept into every aspect of our lives, and although in the art world it has mostly been underhanded in its adoption, the traces of commercialisations touch are still evident in its functioning. Due to this underhandedness there hasn't been much thought put into what 'the monetisation of everything' truly implies for the industry, or how the value of the art object devoted to commercialisation may look like.

The Private Collection (exhibition title of the practical component for submission in MFA completion) addresses the concept of object value and, more specifically, how that value is created within the art world through mechanisms of commercialisation that include celebrity cult, functioning of possession (through collecting), and taste. Research into Walter Benjamin's theory of the authenticity of the work of art, and in particular his concept of "*aura*," has helped inform the creation of a marketing strategy propelled by value driven mechanisms found within the Art Market for *The Private Collection*. Particular emphasis is placed on how brand value drives sales in this thesis.

Thus, *The Private Collection: Aura, the Cult of Celebrity, and the Construct of Value in Saleable Works of Art*, defines *The Private Collection* as a tailored system built expressly for engagement with economic forces inside the art industry. As a result, the position of this study is based on the marketability of the object through particular driving forces that have seeped into the value system of the saleable work of art. The position of this thesis is that in this commercialist system, driving forces of value can be sustained within instances of the multiple. The project additionally supports this in maintaining that interaction from a fine art perspective would be limited if restricted to orthodox approaches (a gallery showing, and one print works), which is why a more economically interactive approach (e-commerce) was decided on for the exhibition component. The *Private Collection* offers an observation that the worth of a saleable work of art has become a warped representation of the commercial context we find ourselves in and that value is only awarded through particular kingmakers of the system.

The practical component of this submission can be viewed online by clicking the image below. Please note that the website is not optimised for phone or tablet use, please instead view it on a computer (preferably a desktop) in full screen mode. For the best viewing experience Google Chrome is recommended:

Alternative link: https://the-private-collection.webflow.io/

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that the thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

Signed:

Date: 22 May 2023

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Acknowledgments

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List of Illustrations

Introduction

In the late 19th century, riding on the heels of a thriving industrial revolution, a small colour printed pasteboard card made its way into circulation as the backboard for cigarette packaging. This card was known as a trade card, since it was primarily manufactured for the purpose of print advertising for a product or company. *Trade Cards: An Illustrated History* (an exhibition of trade cards from the Waxman Collection at Cornell University in 2017) demonstrates not only a history of products and services advertised and available at the time, but provides an important insight into Victorian societal views, beliefs, knowledge and aspirations. The novelty of these cards was that they were printed with colour (something that up until then was rarely seen) and became something that overtime larger companies like Coca-Cola sought to take advantage of in their marketing. Trade Cards were also considered a cheap and effective way to reach customers due to an ever-expanding industrial sector that was driven by countless technological advancements of mechanical reproduction, allowing for greater options in the marketing industry of goods (Cornell University, 2017).

The novelty of the advertising trade card did not last. As the turn of the century approached and technology continued to advance, new possibilities and accessibility in the printing sector meant that the market became saturated with newer and more efficient ways of advertising such as in newspapers and magazines (Cornell University, 2017). With this, trade cards were pushed aside, to collect dust and turn into tokens of a bygone era of advertisement strategy. However, as years went on and people began to remember the small colourful card received in packaging as advertisement, a renewed interest started to emerge (mostly in historians and scholars) (Cornell University, 2017). This renewed interest was not in their previous use, in advertising trade, but more in the capacity for the objects themselves to be tradable: and therefore collectable.

This marked the beginning of the trading cards we all know today, from baseball cards found in packs of bubble gum to Pokémon cards that now sell, today, for thousands of dollars. The industry around a simple piece of card that formed a secondary market of its own – in both collection and in the advent of a game – took off. They themselves began to hold value like any

other commodified object. The humble trading card and its impressive history, which saw it evolve from advertisement pamphlets to collectable card games, succeeded in a commercial environment it once advertised for. In part this was where I began to question how value generation was imbued onto objects.

I began to consider the mechanisms behind the primary theme I saw in the story of the trade card, through its collection. I became particularly interested in collections that are related to particular value generation systems and the mechanisms of the uptake of various items into secondary markets[1]. By definition the act of collecting is described as "an accumulation of objects gathered for study, comparison, or exhibition or as a hobby" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). The question that arises from this is why are they gathered, what value exists that makes them gatherable? Commodification is further spurred on by access to platforms like the internet and by association social media. As a result of this technological globalisation it is arguable that there are innumerable ways in which the act of collecting becomes involved in the exchange of value, from economic, cultural, social and personal.

This is all the more relevant in the art world in the forms of value exchange between those who govern what is, and what is not, considered high valued art. Throughout history collectors of art have sought out work for a variety of reasons including cultural, economic and social motivations. What makes this any different to those who seek out the collection of any other object? The exchange of value between collectors, artists, and society has played a vital role in the shaping of the art markets we see today in an ever-increasing globalised society.

The primary focus of this MFA project - *The Private Collection* - is not the act of collecting itself, but rather the context in which it takes place and the value transactions that control it, where the players of the game of collecting are those I focus on. What has been of interest to me is a compilation of the power structures and individuals that support and orient the constructions of value, rituals of transaction and status that control an underlying medium of consumption,

[1]"The secondary market is where investors buy and sell securities from other investors" (CIF, 2023). In the art market "the secondary market deals with resale, typically with artworks by artists who have a substantial reputation" (Artland, 2023).

especially within the art world. That many of these individuals may at times seem stereotypes and caricatures, has underlined for me the nature of the games they play in generating power and status under the guise of connoisseurship.

The Private collection is an artwork that looks at the following themes: collecting, status, conflation of value (economic, status, cultural value), authenticity and the original. Through this thesis I frame this project by discussing ideas by Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Hollander, examining the postmodern notion of authenticity, the replica and '*aura*' in order to examine how the authentic object may function in today's modern society. Benjamin's theories pertaining to authenticity in the age of reproducibility, are used in contrast with other theories like those of Baudrillard, Umberto Eco and Dennis Dutton to understand how we can begin to authenticate value in the multiple. Baudrillard's theories in relation to collection, brands, and the influence of taste makers in the value production within objects are contrasted with Hollander's celebrity cult to evaluate how and if celebrity status gives collectible value to objects. This is done in an effort to evaluate if an object has autonomic effect on the value of itself or if it is rather by the association with the celebrity status of the artist brand which makes it collectable as a status object whereby it may confer value. To evidence this in looking at the valuing of objects (especially those considered collectable) I consider how branding may also be used as a driving factor of taste. Looking at this concept of the brand I attempt to understand how it achieves emotional attachment or 'brand loyalty' pulling on the theories of Baudrillard and the desired object as a result of ego. Theories by O'Doherty, Lionel Trilling and Brain Massumi are used in conjunction with Baudrillard to examine what other key players contribute to the value manufactured in the collecting game, such as the gallery space as an already institutionalised generator of value. Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital and its generation add to this discussion by creating parallels between value generation and the cults of celebrity.

For my practical component of my MFA I have created *The Private Collection* which is an online artwork that consists of two parts. The one acts as an ironic take on the functioning of the gallery space. It acts as an online, commercial gallery and store that hosts a reserve of artists. Represented on this site are 8 characters or artistic archetypes. These characters are fictional but are based on stereotypes of the art world which may be familiar to viewers. These characters are

comparable in some aspects to a combination of existing artists – both contemporary and historical. I do not elaborate further on who the individual influences of these characters are, because they have been designed to act as mirrors in which people can figure out for themselves who I have referenced. To do so would shut down the options for the audience member to see and recognise who these characters may reference for them. The manner in which I have chosen to do this is to base these characters on archetypes as they are often the easiest way to communicate someone's nature. When developing these archetypes, I have paid careful attention to how curators and artists, themselves, brand their identity. I've looked into how this branding often informs the medium in which each artist works, the subject-matter with which they engage, and how this influences their public persona, which in turn informs their brand identity.

This site functions as the overview site (in our world and fictional site in the characters world) of my exhibition, branded under the name *The Private Collection*. The site is dedicated to marketing and selling of a set of cards called Curator Cards, that are physical trading cards and feature my 8 artistic characters. This trading card set works as an invitation for the audience to play the game of 'collecting the collection.' The characters' names are Kasper Raven, Briar Faye, Kenzo le Chat, Atticus King, Andrea Florhol II, Madu Wolfe, Unknown and Luca Kai. These 8 Artist characters are represented on the Curator cards. They are called Curator cards because I act essentially as the curator (although I am also the maker) of the cards, the characters and overall for my whole exhibition. The website acts as a platform in which these characters are marketed and sold through these collectibles. It does this by selling these cards as collectable trading cards which are similar in ways to 'Top Trump Cards'. I have used Top Trumps as a reference for these cards because they are a game based on statistics. My cards also detail statistics of the fictional characters, this is to encourage the thought of a game in both the childlike sense and in the sense of my main themes of the exhibition.

The style I have adopted for these characters on this site and on the cards, is illustrative and cartoon-like because that is my personal style. But from an academic perspective this has been done to underline how the commercialisation of art objects as collectables and asset class investments (rather than cultural artefacts in their own right) may be compared to the syndication of animation in TV shows and films into collectable products. Syndicated objects are souvenirs

of popular culture and, whilst some of these have garnered high prices amongst fan bases who idealise these objects often based on a kind of nostalgia (this will further be unpacked in chapter 2 in reference to Pokémon), this form of collecting is often perceived to be of a lower cultural value than the objects which are bought and sold as part of a high-end art gallery system. By utilising this style, I also seek to draw attention to the snobbery which makes a distinction between high-art and popular culture as well as to elevate a medium that is often excluded from artistic spaces. It also works to highlight the satirical nature of my commentary much as cartoons have historically been used as a form of political and social criticism. Caricature and stereotyping in political cartoons are used in this format as a form of hyperbole to point to the hypocrisy and failings of real-world individuals. I have thus used this methodology in the creation of my characters to satirise the nature of the game of collecting both in the fictional world I create and to point to how this game of marketing and value generation is played out in the art world by high end gallery spaces, curators and auction houses.

The second component of the exhibition is a group of sites that act as a universe simulation for the 8 characters that I have created. This simulation acts as the universe in which they exist as 'real' famous artists, curators and critics. Their work is as real to them in their universe as our work is to us. They take themselves very seriously, so they act accordingly; reminiscent of how artists in the real world would portray themselves. As they are artists, curators and collectors they have personal sites which host images of their own work and collections on them. You cannot buy any of their own work that they showcase from any of these sites much as professional high-end galleries seek to mask their core function as sales points and preserve their exclusivity: selling more discreetly only to vetted collectors.

These sites are designed to follow a formula that is seen in the sites and work of real artists and galleries. They are clean, minimalist and they try to emulate a white cube feel. These spaces are however not intended to be directly confused with actual artists' sites but are designed to be a caricature of these forms as they exist elsewhere to critique the forms, structures and language utilised in these spaces. This is furthered by the fact that the work is available to look at on these sites, but there are no prices or information on how to purchase these works thus preserving their status as an elite and secretive market space.

All the art on these artist sites are A.I. generated images but all work on the collection site is created by myself. I have used A.I because I wanted to disassociate my style with the style my characters would have. They also needed to have individual differentiated styles and A.I art gave me the ability to do that. This is to question the hypocrisy of authorship in the art world as well as to emphasise that these works and styles are not special; they can be recreated at the push of a button with any subject matter, once one has analysed the formulaic thematic (for use as A.I. prompts) those in a system of power deem worthy of value. That these thematics and preferred materials are able to be generated via A.I. prompts points to the fact that, whilst those in the game of selling speculative art investment attempt to highlight the authentic, original creativity of their stables of artists, they are essentially working to a formula when creating their market. This will be further unpacked relative to my practice in chapter 3. There is thus very little authentic or original about these preferred themes and brand identities of their selected artists. The very fact that I have created everything on *The Private Collection* site myself from scratch is tribute to the fact that it is more original and less formulaic than the work created by my characters.

My artwork as a whole has been created to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the power and value dynamics generated by the Art World. I seek to demonstrate how the power of value comes from the power of influence. Nothing has value until someone (of perceived status) gives it to it. The true art in this system (albeit potentially corrupt and twisted) is not the individual makers of art objects but in the performance of creating brand identity personas for both the artists and the curators as king makers and experts in conferring the status of ‘good taste’. It is a game, and like all games one might cheat whilst playing. The purpose of the work is to highlight the nature of the game, the rules of which the high-end art world tries very hard to conceal. My work is thus a tongue-in-cheek take on how one might ‘cheat’ at this game. This universe acts as an ironic corollary to the serious art world while the satirical nature of the overview site is a direct contrast to it. These two ideas work off each other. The satirical site acts as a complete contradiction to the sites of the artists from the mediums used to the styles they are created in. For example, in the vein of purchasing art, you have the ability to actually buy work on the Curator Cards site, but you are not able/permitted to buy anything from any of the personal sites. One shows what the art world is like in reality by exposing and playing with its hypocrisy while the other plays into it.

While my own artistic endeavour will do little to change the power dynamics of the existing systems in generating value in the art world, I seek to create a humorous moment in which viewers may question these constructions of value and brand identity. My work is also intended to inject a playful dynamic in an art world and economic system that takes itself far too seriously.

Chapter 1: Authenticity

In this chapter, I will examine the notions of authenticity, the replica, and *'aura'* through the perspectives of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, and Paul Hollander. This chapter investigates how the authentic item could operate in postmodern culture while still holding its ability to exist as an original object. I will examine Benjamin's beliefs on authenticity in the era of reproducibility, contrasting them with other theories such as those supplied by Baudrillard, Eco, and Dutton, in order to understand in what way, and by what methods we may begin to authenticate value in an era where the reproduction of art and cultural artefacts (by either authorised or unauthorised means) has become increasingly unavoidable. Hollander offers us a perspective on the Cult of Celebrity to understand how the syndication of fame can be used as a tool for validating products and pushing concepts of value in both editioned multiples as well as mass produced goods and services through a form of brand identification. This chapter will look at the influence of fame in establishing cult value by examining how celebrities (internet, movie stars, sports figures, etc.) achieve cult status through brand identification and ritual following. This phenomenon is backed by mass-produced syndicated products and services that capitalise on the celebrity status of individuals who endorse them.

Chapter 1.1 Authenticity.

> Poets, philosophers and seers have always concerned themselves with the idea of a true self, and the betrayal of the self has been a typical example of the unacceptable.
>
> - D.W. Winnicott, *The Concept of the False Self.*

When one thinks about the word authenticity, its association with ideas of the truth or realness are what is first considered, this being its dictionary definition: “the quality of being real or true” (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Next, one thinks about its contrasting form. The conclusion might be that its opposition is a forgery or fake. Simply this is a way of viewing authenticity under the lens of a real vs fake dichotomy. In other words what is considered the real object and what is considered the artificial object.

To apply this to the art world is no different, however, it is arguably more complicated as the functioning of authenticity cannot just be divided into something so black and white as what is real and what is not. Art complicates authenticity and so it problematises notions of the real vs the fake. This is because if we were to place the formula of 'the real vs fake dichotomy' on art, all art could be argued to be inauthentic because it is either a representation of something other than itself (in the case of figurative works) or is something manufactured (in the case of abstract works). Art under this formula is a type of synthetic production. How then might we apply the concept of Authenticity to Art?

Dennis Dutton supplies a perspective in his work on *Authenticity in Art* in which he proposes two types of authenticity; *nominal authenticity* and *expressive authenticity*. *Nominal authenticity* "refers to the empirical facts concerning the origins of an art object" (2003: 266). This includes the authorship, origins and any provenance relating to that object. *Expressive authenticity* relates more to the thought of the "object's character as a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs" (2003: 258). This second type of authenticity is suggested to complicate the notions of authenticity because of its independence from empirical fact. This is because, as Dutton describes it, *expressive authenticity* originates from the epistemological aspect of the creation of objects. This would include lived experiences, emotion and personal beliefs that are not as easily accessible. This means that it is rather the object's ability to hold the 'authority' of the representative subject and artist's intent that grants it authenticity regardless of whether it is seen as materially accurate.

In another take on the notion of authenticity, Water Benjamin in his essay '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'* (first published 1933) suggests that the premise of authenticity in art is a contrast between an original work and any reproduction thereof, particularly those made by mechanical means which could ultimately be mass produced. He writes that: "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (2008: 3). Writing about the technical reproducibility of art objects - and how such reproduction would deplete the "authority of an art object" (2008: 4) - Benjamin's focus on authenticity is primarily linked to the material object's link to its author as an individual creative genius. Benjamin implies, in inferring

its opposite, that authenticity has rooted itself into the valuing systems surrounding the art object, with the metric for authenticity in visual representation being based on the original as a direct by-product of the author's actual autographic mark.

Benjamin suggests that the original holds more value because its association with its author is known to be real. This is because the consumer knows, or expects, that the author created it with their own hand. Benjamin's focus on authenticity is primarily linked to the material or the presence of the object as original which is unmediated by additional mechanical processes. An object may thus bear witness through this materiality to its provenance through time as the single original work.

We begin to understand this relationship between single material art objects and authenticity when Benjamin starts hinting at a loss of authenticity due to the emergence of mass production through technological means. He says that "in even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art — its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence — and nothing else — that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject" (2008: 21).

Benjamin's position as a Marxist, whilst he finds the values of authenticity interesting, embraces the loss of authentic value (*aura*) as it democratises images. He celebrates this because it divorces hierarchy from art representation. However, it is important to remember the fact that he is writing in the 1930s, when technical replication was still cutting edge but to our modern standard technologically constrained, making his vision of a democratised era of art representation more tenable. As we will see in a moment, it is clear that what he predicted about the fading of the *aura* in modern times has not materialised.

Chapter 1.2: Aura

Benjamin uses the term *aura*, to define this rather difficult to determine quality of what constitutes the original – in this case the original art object – and its context in time and space as unique; an existence in the place it happens to be (2008: 3). First using the term in his discussion

of early portraiture photography in his essay *Little History of Photography* (first published 1931), he looks back on what he terms the "preindustrial heyday" (1999: 508) of photography in which he puts forth that there is a "difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture [which] is unmistakable" (1999: 519). Further elaborating on why there is a difference by offering that the "uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former"(1999: 519). His musings on the *aura* in photography centre around the way in which photographers approached the methods of early portraiture "the procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it" (1999: 514). The creation of imagery in early photography was slow and purposeful, from the taking of the photo, to the subject it was capturing, "during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject (as it were) grew into the picture" (1999: 514). It is put forward in his writing on this method – often referring to the camera obscura – that the *aura* is only as actively intertwined into these earlier forms of photography rather than its latter forms because of these slower mechanisms of capturing. He goes as far as to say that, through the technological advance of the camera, quicker lenses added to the decline of authentic images: "photographers made it their business to simulate the *aura* which had been banished from the picture with the suppression of darkness through faster lenses… They saw it as their task to simulate this *aura* using all the arts of retouching" (1999: 517). In his reflection on the process of early photography he arguably lays the foundational groundwork for the reasoning in why the value creation through the presence of *aura* and authenticity is pertinent in the appraisal of artistic representation.

Further in his analysis of early photography, Benjamin's *aura* additionally implies that its creation is observed through the distinct relation between an individual and the act (most noticeably experience) of creating an object or image. This idea is supplemented by Diarmuid Costello who notes in his essay *Aura, Face, Photography* that the "real object of Benjamin's interest is the structure of experience, i.e. the underlying form to which all experience must conform in order to be experienced at all – as opposed to the content of any particular experience" (2005: 10). It is here that we can begin to appreciate that it is not so much that Benjamin's *aura* grapples with what is objectively the authentic original, but rather the idea that it is the experience of being attached to something in its unmediated form that allows it to capture an *aura* to enforce

authenticity. It can therefore be said that what is experienced, specifically in relation to the object, is what is then carried with it through its history; it is "the experience that there is something about an object that transcends our experience of it, an opacity internal to our experience of the object itself" (2005: 11).

Benjamin suggests that *aura* has the distinct ability to go beyond time whilst still caring with it a sense of experience of history. The object transcends its perceived temporal positioning in the here and now because it depends heavily on its relation to the temporal positioning of the perception of its creation. Benjamin thus describes *aura* as "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance" (2008: 23). This is because the *aura* is able to hold a distinct sliver of time that influences the perception of that object of when, where, how and who created it: "the genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears" (2008: 7). The object is unique and unrepeatable, because its conditions of creation, from the weather, down to the very materials used to make it, cannot be reproduced exactly. It is what the object has been exposed to, in the very history of its unique existence which cannot be replicated. This sliver in time holds great importance to Benjamin and the point of significance of the object's creation as its very existence ties an object to its creator's experience as well as the experience of the object through time.

With all this being said, why is *aura* so important when discussing the ideas surrounding authenticity in art and what is its relevance to the argument? Benjamin's chief takeaway from his ideas surrounding the *aura* (specifically in relation to the art object) is, when an object holds an *aura*, the *aura* becomes the chief denominator in determining how authentic that object is. Authenticity, Benjamin argues, is thus determined by the experience held by that object in its fixed position in time and space and because of that, the *aura* created by it cannot be reproduced or copied because the point of significance could never be exactly replicated (2008: 3-6). For Benjamin only the original has the ability to possess the *aura* and this is what renders the object unique.

Benjamin, however, goes on to explain how with the advent of mechanical reproduction, there is a shift in the *aura* that surrounds the creation of the authentic object. Benjamin argues that authenticity is lost because the reproduction cannot hold the same *aura* as an original: “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.” (2008: 6). The reproduction cannot hold the *aura* of the original because it has no connection to the original's material experience of the place and time of the original's creation as well as the authoritative value its history places on it. He notes that: the here and now of the work of art—its singular existence in a specific place—is absent from even the most faultless reproductions. It is this one-of-a-kind existence, and nothing else, that carries the imprint of the work's past (2008: 21). This is because representation loses the *aura* due to mechanical reproduction, and Benjamin thus implies that it loses its need for the authoritative presence (often that of religion but also the art academy) to determine an exclusive value system.

It is important again to remember (especially in this instance) that Benjamin was a Marxist so his ideas that surround the shift in *aura* are seen as political: "but as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionised. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics" (2008: 25). Benjamin does not lament the loss of the *aura* due to this fact. On the contrary, *aura* as described by Benjamin is capitalist, as it accrues value over a period of time through authorities that control ritual (and is thus dependent on them to gain value and remain relevant). Benjamin thus sees the control of authenticity as decreed by art world authority as a way for the capitalist ‘*superstructure*’ to remain in control of the masses. For Benjamin its loss is seen as a way for the authorities associated with *aura* to not distract from the politics of representational art. With the advent of mechanical reproduction, the singular object becomes null and void with more emphasis placed on the group rather than the singular “by replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence” (2008: 22). In the instance of the object and representation, it boils down to the availability mechanical reproduction gives that object. If more people see it, or recognise it, its *cult value* is diminished, and its *display value* is increased[2]. It

[2] The concepts behind Cult value and Display Value will be clarified in 1.4

could then be argued that mechanical reproduction democratises the art object by increasing its access and social visibility.

Chapter 1.3 Ritual and the Art Object.

In addition to the aspect of *aura* as an authority of authenticity, Benjamin observes a connection between *aura* as something originating from the practices of ritual. The Cambridge English dictionary defines ritual as "a fixed set of actions and words, especially as part of a religious ceremony" (Cambridge University Press, 2023). For Benjamin ritual and tradition form significant points of authority in the creation of an object's *aura* as he believes that there is a persistence of ritual that is seen throughout the history of representational art. Often making use of words that describe a ritualistic nature such as 'worship', 'tradition' etc, he argues that *aura* is manifested onto an object that often revolves around practices associated with ritual: "the uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition" (Benjamin, 2008: 24). Benjamin notes how art production has through history always borne close links to ritual as a form of authority in tradition from the cave paintings of prehistory, to ancient Greek sculptures and pottery, to the ornamentation of mediaeval religious buildings. Benjamin notes that all "the earliest artworks originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind" (2008: 24). He then suggests that this ritualised authority took on a more secular tradition in Western art with the Renaissance and later centuries academic painting in a kind of "secular cult of beauty" (2008: 24).

Benjamin explains that the *aura*, by taking on ritual or tradition, creates an authority over its representing authentic objects, by using its functions such as worship to cement the object's authoritative nature through its provenance. But he suggests that this has not changed since our earliest knowledge of representational art.

It is apparent in reading Benjamin's work that authority becomes a recurring and important theme in his argument surrounding ritual. This can be seen in the way in which Benjamin frames the *aura* as something that is reliant on practice that aligns itself with ideas of worship (referring to the art academy), calling upon the authority associated with the ritual and tradition to validate

the value of the object through the implication of its context “the unique value of the "authentic" work of art always has its basis in ritual”(2008: 24). This is seen referenced in his work, where many of the objects he mentions hold a certain amount of authority through their known context “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions . . . await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate,”(2008: 4) to carry the origins and conditions of that object through history. Authority in this instance is validated by the presence of the history tied to the object in question as well as to those who decree which objects of art are worthy of this preservation.

Benjamin explains how the same principle idea of religious, magical or ritualistic worship has been able to evolve to hold the same authority in a secular movement of artistic representation. This can be seen when he refers to the ideas surrounding beauty in the Renaissance period. While secular, the importance placed on beauty in that period is reminiscent of the worship of relics and symbols of religion that came before it, "this ritualistic basis, however mediated it may be, is still recognisable as secularised ritual in even the most profane forms of the cult of beauty" (2008:24). Benjamin goes as far to say that regardless of the advent of mechanical reproducibility, art still managed to keep its ritualistic nature in the academic and museum context where official sanction by ‘high priests’ of another kind still lent their authority to what should or should not be included in an art history cannon.

From this perspective, the object is allowed to keep its uniqueness as it manifests a connection to the divine or the authority. This is arguably the groundwork of value creation in the instance of the art world because these objects become associated with this authority through their status as objects that mediate a unique connection to said authority - whether this authority is the recognised artist who has produced them or the curators and collectors who have deemed them worthy.

As such, we begin to notice that Benjamin's view on the *aura* relies on the hierarchy (of the art academy), which calls upon the authority associated with secular ritual and tradition to validate the value of the object through the implication of its context.

Chapter 1.4: Benjamin's cult and display value.

Benjamin maintains that authenticity is valued in two ways through ritual — *cult value* and *display value* — but that this has shifted from one to the other, attributing this shift to the advent of mechanical replication. These two variables, which determine how much *aura* (uniqueness) an object may have, are crucial for understanding how the authentic worth of an object changed with the development of mechanical replication (2008: 7).

Benjamin explains that over time there was a shift in how artistic representations' authenticity was valued through their canonical authorities. He argues that, as technology improved, these attributes switched from being an authority based in ritual, to a value of objects that became commodities; they must be displayed in order to exist. He refers to this in the shift as one from *cult value* (value in religious ritual) to *display value* (aesthetic value) (2008: 7).

Cult value is a term used to describe representation that achieves its purpose through exclusivity, it “would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden” (2008: 7). Benjamin asserts that existing is more crucial for cult objects than being seen. In this instance, the depiction is employed to make value associated with a divine power evident as opposed to exhibiting it for its representational value; it serves as a status symbol through its veneration "the absolute emphasis on its cult value, [is that] it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognised as a work of art"(2008: 7). Due to its exclusivity, this kind of representation generates a higher value. The general public does not typically have access to it.

Display value moves away from the object's exclusivity. It is not tied to a place as its purpose is to be viewed rather than used for exclusive individual status. Benjamin asserts that display value is based on an image that was created with the intention of being displayed; it is its ability to be seen and known that accumulates value. For Benjamin, as a direct result of this, *aura* (the appearance of a distance) completely vanishes due to the display-driven need to make the representational object visible. Because of this development, art was able to fundamentally affect how reality and its intrinsic meaning were seen by the audience, with the capacity to distort and modify their vision of reality. Through photography and cinema, artists could take what was

perceived as reality and turn it, through careful editing, into something wholly unreal. Through reproduction, and the potential to display work to a broader audience, Benjamin anticipated a reduction in the exclusivity associated with *cult value*. He could not have anticipated, however, how this notion would subsequently become distorted through the rise of secular celebrity.

In more recent times, *cult* and *display* value have become conflated since the distinctions between them have grown obscured. *Display value* has become a contradictory value (attributed to its secular character) under Benjamin's definition. This is because it keeps the functioning of worship that we see in *cult value*, even in the most profane representations of the cult of beauty, and this ritualistic core, however mediated, is identified as secularised ritual (Benjamin. 2008: 24). We can see this in the secularised cults of beauty that have extended to Instagram influencers and popularised personalities today: "in the society of exhibition, every subject is also its own advertising object" (Han, 2015: 10). While the object of worship no longer serves a purpose in a sacred worship setting (religious and ritualistic), the concept of worship remains in the museum (or the field in which the celebrity moves). As we've already seen, Benjamin claims that the representations in both of these cases are related to an establishment, rather than the audience, "the uniqueness of the work of art is identical with its embeddedness in the context of tradition. … ... The original way in which the work of art was embedded in the context of tradition was through worship" (2008: 10). There is still a feeling of hierarchy in the secular display of art, in which the object's legitimacy is still dependent on hierarchies of authority. Benjamin does highlight this, emphasising that the item's value is dependent on a higher force to exist and acquire enough *aura* to persist through time while maintaining its authenticity, but owing to the times in which he is writing, his ideas have become distorted.

Chapter 1.5: Authenticity through Hyperreality.

While Benjamin put forward the notion that, with mass production of the object there can no longer be authenticity in that object as the *aura* of the original is lost, Jean Baudrillard infers, in *Simulacra and Simulation* that (with the advent of popular culture) there were no longer such clear distinctions between the authenticity of the so called original and its reproduction. For Baudrillard, the functioning of authenticity is in the material object, as the relationship between

the signifier and the signified becomes blurred. In this case there is little difference between what the object represents (external to itself; signified) and what the object is (signifier). This is because: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (1994: 2). In his essay *Travels in Hyperreality* (1985), Umberto Eco foresaw the advent of the era of simulation supplying a coexisting theory created alongside Baudrillard known as hyperreality. Eco, inferring from his views of the United States, postulated that there exists an obsession with replicating the authentic and making it better: "holography could prosper only in America, a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a "real" copy of the reality being represented" (1985: 4). Hyperreality refers to the blurring of the synthetic and the real to the extent where there is no distinction between what is real and what is not "reality itself, as something separable from signs of it … vanished in the information-saturated, media-dominated contemporary world" (Baudrillard, 1994: 1018). Both authors agree there is a "real without origin" and "authentic fake" which acts as a deliberate choice to treat a copy as something just as real as the original. It is here that we can also apply Dutton's ruminations on authenticity as he explains that authenticity is "a term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of its referent is being talked about" (2003: 258). To illuminate this point, he considers how a forgery of a Vermeer by Han van Meegeren is both an authentic van Meegeren and a fake Vermeer, much as a phoney dollar bill may be both a legitimate piece of paper and a fraudulent legal token of currency (2003: 258). This school of thought supplies a different take on how authenticity may function with the advent of mass production and leads one to believe that Dutton's take on expressive authenticity (that of a more subjective perspective) could be used as a justification of this. This theory also bears relation to the idea of *cult* and *display* value supplied in Benjamin's theories in which the cult (art academy) manages to manipulate, through the institution of art, by prioritising qualities that subdue the political, thus forcing the *aura* (authority) back into what is represented. The idea of authority in the case of mechanical reproducibility can be argued as a form of *cult value* that has further been conflated by the emergence of commercialisation (as a result of mechanical reproducibility) in popular culture as suggested by the theories of Eco and Baudrillard.

Chapter 1.6: The Cult of Celebrity.

> Within a capitalist consumer society, the cult of personality has the power to subsume ideas, to make the person, the personality into the product and not the work itself.
>
> - Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*

The *Cult of Celebrity* also known as the *Cult of Personality* is defined by the Cambridge English dictionary as "someone or something that has become very popular with a particular group of people" (Cambridge, 2020). The use of the term started to circulate around 1956 after Russia's then president Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech on the *Cult of Personality* surrounding Stalin's hold on power and influence during his time in power (Mudde, et al., 2017: 63).

Paul Hollander writes on the *Cult of Celebrity* giving insight into how the concept of value surrounding an individual can be manipulated to give further value to something else. Hollander speaks of this cult way of thinking as a manifestation of fame for fame sake, describing the *cult of celebrity* as one derived from Capitalist (American) culture and viewed as "a sharply distinguishing form of hero worship... precondition[ed] to be well known without reason" (2010: 388).

A recurring theme here is that the value of something is not distinctly in what is created but what the 'fame' surrounding its author has gifted it. Benjamin understood, in his reference to film, that *aura* could be built up upon the actor: "not only does the cult of the movie star which it fosters preserve the magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its commodity character, but its counterpart the cult of the audience, reinforces the corruption … seeking to supplant the class consciousness of the masses"(2008: 33). An object's value is imbued on it by the celebrity status of its author and the authority of the arena in which the celebrity moves (may it be in social media, sport, or Hollywood) thus, gaining the ability to increase and decrease value respectively. Often, this endorsement is obtained through the celebrity's engagement in brand advocacy rather than any direct involvement in the production of the product. This is arguably how the control of the object is cemented through the cult. Baudrillard's writing

on collecting illustrates this is how an art object does not in fact hold its own economy: “an analogous structure on the sociological level is to be found in the system of model and series: both the series and the collection serve to institute possession of the object — that is, they facilitate the mutual integration of object and person” (1996: 91). Harold Rosenburg further justifies this idea when he notes that the artist in the cult resembles that of the theory of mass culture “in which the artist is cast in a similarly heroic mold” (2001: 80).

Hollander writes that, “celebrities also serve economic functions: they are essential for popularising and promoting products of popular culture and they help to sell a wide variety of goods and services by endorsing them in advertisements' ' (2010: 391). Hollander references the economic power of the celebrity’s autographic mark (here manifested as brand identity) as a way of manipulating fame as an economic engine. In the case of products or services, the *cult of celebrity* adds (as brand endorsement) value through the perceived status of the celebrity, not necessarily the skill of the author or/ artist. This is interesting because this is not exclusive to the single original object. It may include objects that are mass produced, and in most cases not even the direct work (as creator or designer) of the endorsing celebrity. Rosenberg further adds to this by speaking on how art in particular had been entrapped in the system of mass production labelling it as a ‘programmed response’ to the media system -- “eminence… has been measured as it is in Hollywood or Madison avenue, by the responses of crowds rather than by critical approval” (2001: 72).

The marketing of goods and services of popular culture are no longer distinguished (as has been previously) from the realm of exclusive high art. There has been a bleed of popular culture into the influence of high culture. There has historically been a significant separation between what are considered higher class objects of taste (art) and objects of ‘meaninglessness’ (objects of commodification). This gap however has grown increasingly smaller as platforms such as social media have disseminated into society, evidenced in the proliferation of promotion and commodification in the art world. This is seen in the increase of art fairs and speculative investing in newer emerging artists (most typically from countries outside of the West) which has further underlined the increasing commodification of high art seen here in an article by Melanie Gerlis on art as a financial asset, “art’s growing status as an asset is simply because of the price levels at

which it can now trade, making it a more meaningful part of a high net-worth individual's portfolio" (2022). This is further seen in the decline in funding for museums and connoisseurs of art spaces. Their place as arbitrators of a better class of taste is taken by their commercialised cousins who now operate as these arbiters but rather place emphasis on commodification and sales while they work under the guise of their historical functioning.

Critic and research analyst of the African art market, Mary Corrigall, sheds further light on this shift by observing that "the veritable 'emerging' artist has a curious gravitational pull on even the most disinterested art collector, for there are few people who don't harbour a fantasy of buying an artwork that will one day furnish them with a deposit for a luxury car, even if they have a capacious garage lined with expensive cars"(2023). This emphasises how commercialisation has permeated into the art world and how art investing is no more about purchasing works of art that one enjoys or wants to preserve as part of a cultural collection, but rather about how an artwork may be exchanged as an investment asset for potential future financial rewards. It has become an investment intended to cheat the economic system rather than an object to be coveted and possessed for its own sake.

Chapter 1.7: Conclusion.

Benjamin ideas surrounding authenticity prevail, for him, in the *aura*. In his view there has been a steady progression in the loss of authenticity due to the advancements brought on by mechanical reproduction. These ideas are however problematised by Baudrillard and Eco who say that the multiple becomes authentic through hyper-reality. Hyper-reality, in the increase of social media as an influence on culture and the virtual space of the internet has become more normalised as part of everyday exchanges which has further complicated notions of reality as the physical/virtual world becomes blurred. As a result, it is here that we can see that the arbiters of taste and therefore the cult/tradition which Benjamin sees started with religious leaders and progressed to the secular cult of beauty (where the authority is the museum or academia) has shifted now to the auction house, the art fair and the commercial high-end gallery. In contemporary society, if *aura* is what makes a work intrinsically valuable, the functioning of the *aura* has moved its positionality from the original to the brand. This is because the brand has become the original

(in a sense) due to the commercialisation of our society. What we take in as original does not necessarily now mean that it must be singular but is premised on the celebrity brand with which the objects are associated.

Chapter 2: Collecting

Chapter 2.1 This is true of all collecting.

> Leisure, culture, art, information, entertainment, knowledge, the most personal and radical of gestures, and every conceivable aspect of life is reproduced as a commodity: packaged and sold back to the consumer. Even ways of life are marketed as lifestyles, and careers, opinions, theories, and desires are consumed as surely as bread and jam.
>
> Sadie Plant, *The most radical gesture.*

In August 2019, a set of 103, first edition Pokémon cards from 1999 were sold at Goldin Auction for $107,010 USD (Goldin Auctions, 2019). The bidding started at $25 000 USD. 12 bids later, the figure soared to the impressive 6 figure sum it sold for (Taylor, 2019). A year and a half later, a set of similar first edition cards from 1999 went on auction in January 2021 (these cards were expected to sell for as much as $750 000 USD) and ended in a closing bid of $666,000 USD (Edwards, 2021).

Similarly – and arguably more impressive – in December 2020 a single 1st edition PSA Gem MT 10[3] Charizard card (Figure 1) sold for $369,000 USD (Leung, 2020). The collector purchased the card in 2009 for $700 USD (even then, a hefty fee for 1 card) as a token of nostalgia from his childhood, and as a welcome addition to his collection of cards from the franchise that he loved (Leung, 2020). Since its creation in 1996, Pokémon has become a pop culture phenomenon and an important contributor to modern collecting.

In 2011, New York city art collector, Anne Huntington, purchased *'Eve'* 2008 (Figure 2) by photographer Alex Prager. She bought the piece at an art fair explaining that she purchased it

[3] PSA Gem MT 10 is a mint condition card that conforms with every PSA requirement perfectly. PSA is the largest and most respected third-party authentication and grading company in the world for trading cards and memorabilia. Grading is assessing the quality and condition of a trading card using PSA's 10-point grading scale. Grading can only take place after a trading card has been deemed authentic (Professional Sports Authenticator. (PSA, 2023)

because she found it interesting. The print, according to the website Artsy.net, was valued at around £1190 (€1348.31) in 2008 (Artsy, 2023). Today this photograph is valued at 5 times more than its original purchase price, estimated to be between €12000-€18000 according to the website invaluable.com. When asked about the rise in value of the photograph in her collection, Huntington had this to say, “it's still a rewarding feeling when the market agrees with your taste” (cited in Selter, 2016).

While these stories seem dissimilar in their commercial environments, there is a common theme that connects them intrinsically. Each one has seen a rapid increase in value as the years progressed. But why?

In the case of the Pokémon cards, the price of first edition cards seem to have skyrocketed during the period of 2019/2020. Some cards accumulated values of over 500% more than what they were previously valued at. In the Charizard card’s case there was a key feature of the card that made it more converted over the rest. It was in the original print run of that card that there was a print defect where the Charizard was printed with no shadow (The Relentless Dragon, 2023). After the discovery of this defect, all versions of the card that were suspected to have the defect were quickly pulled from shelves and reprinted meaning that only a small amount made it out into circulation. This small defect made this card rare and thus converted by collectors (The Relentless Dragon, 2023).

Collectable items are arguably destined to grow in value over a period of time, especially those that are released for a limited time. As Baudrillard frames it, time has become a vector of value and thus it takes time before the value of these types of items increase – when this happens an antique[4] like status is awarded to them; “the past in its entirety has been pressed into the service of consumption” (Baudrillard, 1996: 84).

[4] A collectable object, such as a piece of furniture or work of art that has a high value because of its age and quality (The Oxford dictionary, 2023). While the phrase is a bit ambiguous, most antique dealers concur that anything older than 100 years are antiques. However, some experts disagree, believing that only "masterpieces" of design and craftsmanship qualify as antiques (Bridgman, 2020).

This is seen in the case with the Charizard card (that was bought for $700 USD in 2009) whose base price in 1999 would have been considerably less considering that a pack of 11 of these cards sold for around 70 c USD back then. In the ten years between 1999 and 2019, there were hundreds of editions, packs and other Pokémon characters introduced – resulting in enough time having passed for the original edition to become a rare commodity, ultimately pushing its value up further. For Baudrillard the antique exists to preserve time in a way in which value can be added to it; “to the extent that it is there to conjure up time as part of the atmosphere, and to the extent that it is experienced as a sign, it is simply one element among others, and relative to all others" (1996: 74) Whilst the Charizard card is not by its age an antique, that its part appeal (as stated by the collector) is the sense of nostalgia the collector feels towards the object this would appear to affirm Baudrillard’s viewpoint.

Pokémon (pocket monsters in English) was created by Satoshi Tajiri and Ken Sugimoriin who were inspired by a childhood fascination for the collecting of small insects and creatures (BBC, 2021). In 1996 a game called Pokémon Green and Red versions were released for Nintendo Gameboy (BBC, 2021). A year after its release, the game's popularity prompted a different company to partner with the intellectual property (I.P) of Pokémon to create a trading card game (TCG) under the same name but with different rules. In the same year a TV show was also released which followed a young boy named Satoshi (later renamed Ash) and his Pokémon Pikachu, in his adventure to become a master Pokémon trainer by battling in Pokémon tournaments around the Pokémon universe (BBC, 2021). Along the way he meets many other trainers like Brock and Misty who become his good friends and some of the most recognisable subsidiary characters in the universe while also meeting and contenting with many enemies like the infamous Team Rocket.

The games, TCG and T.V show were all released to a Japanese audience first and once its popularity grew, it was then picked up and released to western audiences (Bulbagarden, 2023). The I.P was so popular that it has spanned 25 years of content, from numerous toys and games to movies and live action adaptations. Pokémon grew into a global marketing powerhouse. It was thus understandable how the nostalgia alone created a resurgence of the I.Ps popularity. People who grew up watching the show, playing the games and collecting the cards as children, are all adults now, but they and not children, are the demographic who are compelled further into

reigniting the popularity of Pokémon. This is spurred on by the nostalgia of collecting a part of their childhood. Further value can be created and imbued into these syndicated products that emerged from games and T.V shows because they hold a sense of nostalgia stemming from childhood.

This is evidenced now when 25 years on from the cards' first release, single Pokémon cards are selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars. This increase has been so drastic, that it becomes compelling to understand why. Baudrillard offers an explanation of how these items incur more value over time in that in an age of popular culture and mass production; "the task of signifying transcendence has fallen to material signs - to pieces of furniture, objects, jewellery and works of art of every time and every place" (1996: 84). Looking at the conditions in which both the cards and the artwork by Alex Prager saw their value rise, we can understand some of the influence of the *Cult of Celebrity* on the valuation of an object. In the case of both these stories of collecting there is arguably a common contributor to the answer of this question – fame! But is this the fame of the franchise or artist or is it the hike in valuation prices which sparks investment interest because the exponential sales are in themselves newsworthy?

The value creation seen in the case of *Eve* is comparable in some of the same ways that are seen in the hike in value of Pokémon cards as a collection (which was mainly driven by factors like nostalgia sparked by the cards' resurgence in popularity years later, fuelling the continued syndication of objects within that I.P). The similarity exists, as a result of the monetisation of high culture. The market values created by the art world are a clear example of this, as they seep into these high cultural settings through a value system based on commodification aspects (advertising, marketing, and branding) which in turn develop into the tastemakers of the art market.

Corrigall gives insight into the market values surrounding the emergence of newer artists in her article *Collecting Art: A Guide to Finding The Next Big Artist* (2023) which aptly highlights parallels to the successes seen in artists like Prager. She emphasises that sales patterns and pricing (while not mutually exclusive) can be placed into categories of market successes, one of which includes young established artists (2023). The investment potential in collecting from an artist that is young and relatively established (in that they have somewhat of an established grip on their own

practice) is that they are generating work that demonstrates potential, which in turn for the collector demonstrates potential market successes (Corrigall, 2023). If one buys early on in a potential market friendly artist's career and they turn out to be a success, the potential capital gains, become the driving force of this thought process. Art collecting as a speculative investment is thus not about demonstrating taste or preserving culture but is merely another kind of trading in stocks and shares and these attitudes influence the valuation of art objects in economic terms.

Press interest in Prager's work seems to stem not from early exhibitions of her work, which occurred in unusual settings or impromptu venues such as laundrettes, nor focus on the content of the work. Instead press interest seems to have generated because of a rising market interest once her work began to be collected and displayed by influential people. Any literature seemed to appear mostly in 2010 (according to the press pages and literature posted on Prager's official artist website), the year that her photograph *Crowd #1 (Stan Douglas)* (Figure 3) was included in a group exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York's annual showcase of up-and-coming photographers (Dowling, 2010). Not only is the MOMA a major art museum space, but the exhibition literature explains that the exhibition's purpose was to highlight new upcoming artists who explore a line between art and editorial work, as referenced here by the exhibition's curator Roxana Marcoci: "younger artists reinvest in photographic authorship, creating pictures that often exist simultaneously as commercial assignment and artwork" (cited in Dowling, 2010). *Crowd #1 (Stan Douglas)*, Prager's included piece, was actually created for an editorial edition of the Fashion magazine W for their November issue, but had its debut at the MoMa exhibit (Dowling, 2010). The relevance of this is that Prager was seen as "a commercial up-and-comer" (Boyle, 2013) who had found some success working in the editorial world as a photographer and had now been 'discovered' in the art world. There has increasingly been greater acclamation of people outside of the art field becoming increasingly accepted into the space through their work that had previously only existed in a commercial space. As Baudrillard asserts that commercially driven objects have increasingly been used to signify value (which I expand on more later in the chapter), much like art has in the past, this shows a change in how the act of collection (particularly in the art world) began to evolve. The rising cultural impact of social media and the virtual world of the internet, which has grown more prevalent in daily interactions, has complicated the value

system that art traditionally knew and thus the art world (collectors, galleries and museums) has responded to such through elevation of previously commercialised objects into their higher culture.

The fact that Huntington bought Eve a year after MoMa (2011) does not come as a surprise when examining the timeline. Huntington herself described the rapid market inflation of *Eve's* purchase price, five years later, as a rewarding feeling when the market agrees with particular tastes, which is a highly poignant indication of speculative financial motive behind the purchase (Selter, 2016). Particularly given that Prager was in good standing before, during, and after the acquisition, especially given that she produced her most successful early solo show two years later. In 2013 Prager's *Face in the Crowd* exhibition was held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. This exhibition was marked as her defining work as seen here in an essay by Clare Garfik – "Alex Prager's 2013 exhibition *Face in the Crowd* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. was not only Prager's first solo museum exhibition in the USA, but also marked a decisive change in practice and the ambition in her work." (2018)

Interestingly when reflecting on the statement above, we can begin to witness first-hand how the manipulation of a slight change in perception can work to game the economic system through a form of marketing. For instance, the article mentions that Prager's debut at the museum marked a decisive change in her work (the phrasing used to describe her work implies a change in the perception not only of public awareness of her work, but also how she approached her own work). What interests me here is, how this conclusion is achieved. If one considers her work prior to 2013 there seems to be very little aesthetic or thematic difference from what she was producing in comparison to what she produced in 2013 for her *Face In The Crowd* exhibition. Pieces such as *Crowd #1 (Stan Douglas)* (Figure 3) which was created in 2010 (and was even included in the *Face In The Crowd* exhibition) shows very little thematic difference to *Crowd #3 (Pelican Beach)* (2013) (Figure 4) (Alex Prager Studio, 2023).

According to an article in the Washington post *At Corcoran, Alex Prager's colour photographs of crowds depict detachment in togetherness (2013)* a connection between the fashion industry and museums was developing. This was seen as a focused attempt on the part of galleries to respond to changing market trends in order to serve a newer, more commercialised audience

(Boyle, 2013). It is asserted that the Corcoran most likely took this tendency into consideration when curating the exhibition, especially since the art collection was shifting its emphasis away from the industry tastemakers who had previously served as its primary audience and toward an investment market (Boyle, 2013). Prager, having had a history of photographing for various editorials (including fashion), was a prime candidate to take advantage of this growing connection, while also taking into consideration that the fashion magazine W co-sponsored the exhibition (Boyle, 2013). Baudrillard offers an interesting parallel to a strategy such as this in advertising in the indicative (1996: 166). This is the effectiveness of the advertisement not as a method to necessarily produce a sale but rather in the ingrained cultural expression that promotes a society rooted in consumerism.

> Just as the object's function may ultimately amount merely to the provision of a justification for the latent meanings that the object imposes, so in advertising (and all the more so inasmuch as it is the more purely connotative system) the product designated - that is, its denotation or description - tends to be merely an effective mask concealing a confused process of integration. (1996: 166)

With reference to celebrity cult, and especially value production, it is evident that Prager has marketed herself extremely successfully. Her work itself underlines a successful rags to riches trope, which is paralleled with her own personal story of her journey in the art world. She started out as a receptionist who decided to pursue her love of photography with no formal training, displaying work in small spaces like launderettes, and still managed to rise through the ranks of the art world, only growing in value as she became more popular (Bourton, 2018). From the aesthetics of her work that illustrate a Hollywood type of nostalgia (that pulled on the aspirations of people), to the spaces she worked with and the people associated with them these factors only helped elevate her further. While not necessarily anything new and exciting changed in her work from the time she exhibited in the Corcoran, her story and involvement in the editorial industry helped serve a purpose for the gallery to take advantage of. This then propelled her into a brighter spotlight as a member of the art world, "Alex's first museum show in the USA as the sole artist" (Bourton, 2018) not just the editorial photographer. The smoke and mirrors of marketing and branding (which have usually been separate from high culture) have helped stabilise

the infrastructure of the perception of a high culture while the advantages of markets and consumerism still bear fruit.

Chapter 2.2 The space of display as celebrity cult.

A prevalent take away from the cases of Prager and Pokémon is that there are notable market forces that have the ability to drive value and impact commercial taste. This is especially true if one were to consider market forces in the art world. An important one being the space of display (both the museum and the gallery) and the influence it has on value production, not only as a space, but also through those who have influence in the space (both in the past and present).

There exists an intangibility of value exchange in art spaces which arguably allows for value generation through the participation within the space. These spaces operate as a platform to support the development of the individual experiences that the space offers as a form of capital production and social capital, in addition to possessing the capacity to transact and generate in the form of physical profit, such as the exchanging of products (artworks). This furthers the value of the object through the gallery as an authority of value. To expand on this, I point to the literature from authors such as Lionel Trilling and Brian O'Doherty on the politics of the space of display.

The gallery is a key player in the collecting game as it is a space which combines object and person to simulate value and status through ascribing ‘authenticity’ to objects of art. Lionel Trilling comments on the gallery space as Cult leader; and arbiter of taste through the construction and accreditation of authenticity whose, “... provenance is the museum, where the person’s expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and therefore worth the price that is asked for them—or, if this has already been paid, worth the admiration they are being given”(1972: 93).

Offering a parallel to the idea of the gallery as an influencer of value, Brain Massumi’s *Affect Theory* is a theory explained as 'the capacity to affect and to be affected.' In summary Massumi outlines, in his text *The Autonomy of Affect,* how affect and emotion are intrinsically connected. Massumi describes affect as the intensity of a subjective experience that is not yet fully

established or expressed. This suggests that before being altered by language or conscious thought, affect is the fundamental constituent of our emotional responses. As a result, affect operates at a level prior to cognition and is more closely linked to our physical feelings and unconscious wants. As such, Massumi explains how there is a significant increase in remembrance and value with the added incentive of an emotional response (2002: 87-89). He explains that:

> An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of intersection of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativisable action reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. (2002: 88)

Massumi surmises that if there is an emotional connection to the experience being had then the likelihood of that experience being remembered is greater (2002: 84). In the context of art galleries, our emotional responses to art influence how we respond to it. A piece of art, for instance, could inspire positive feelings like transcendence, whereas we might experience a sense of discomfort or indifference when viewing a piece that challenges our values or beliefs. This may be seen in the example of Pokémon in childhood nostalgia, as well as in Prager's work *Face in the Crowd*, which is based on dreams and goals that are not uncommon among particular individuals (often seen in people who live in California or move there for a dream of a certain way of life). Nostalgia as a desire for times gone by is frequently sold to people through Hollywood. Prager's work (and her rags to riches: receptionist to famous artist life story) is familiar to audiences as a kind of Cinderella story, which is intrinsic to this archetype in Hollywood films. The marketing and publicising of the artist's own journey to being discovered thus operates as a metatextual way to reinforce these themes of being discovered in her work and underpin an emotional connection through nostalgia and longing much like the Pokémon cards.

Massumi's Affect theory is important for the concept of the gallery serving as an arbiter of taste since it provides a framework for understanding how our emotions and experiences shape how we perceive art. The gallery's role as an authority requires more than simply putting on a show of a select set of artworks that adhere to particular aesthetic criteria; it also entails manufacturing an emotional atmosphere that holds the ability to influence how we respond to the art that is on

display. The layout of a gallery, the lighting, the distance between pieces of art, and the general atmosphere may all affect how we feel when we are around art. The significance of this is that galleries can capitalise on our preprogramed tendencies to accept that the space must know the value of the work as it is the one holding it by building on the widely accepted model that they are the influencers of value within the space and therefore what is displayed in the space.

Following this line of thought, Brian O'Doherty (1986) further validates Trilling ruminations on the gallery as a cult, in his essay *Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space* rationalising an obsession that seemed to emerge in the 20th century that centred around the white walled gallery. He underlines how this obsession poured itself into the modernist era of art creating a socio-economic centre of power within the spaces where works of art are displayed. His work ruminates on many physical aspects of these types of spaces, including their framing and the dynamics of their construction.

Primarily however, he focuses on how these aspects begin to manipulate how the space begins to function as a space of power. The main point I will stress in my reading of O'Doherty is how he describes the functioning of the four walls of the gallery or museum space and how they manoeuvred themselves into the position of power through emanating the manifestation of a separate entity detached from those who may occupy the space, "the wall, the context of the art, had become rich in a content it subtly donated to the art." (O'Doherty, 1986: 29). It is explained in a way in which the suggestion of autonomy from time is what elevates the spaces sovereignty; the space creates an entrapment of time in a way in which the space becomes almost divine in nature as if it is the one creating the art it holds thus "eliminate[ing] the awareness of the outside world" (O'Doherty, 1986: 8).

In this way I press upon some of the parallels that relate to the notions of the ritual and in particular how Benjamin's *aura* and its supporting authenticity functions comparably – this being the power of manipulation of the experiences in time and space to convince us of importance and authority. Drawing on the notion of *aura* and authority, according to O'Doherty (1986) and his inferring of the eternal linearity of the space as a physical embodiment itself, it can be argued that the space itself becomes an authority of the place that is art, rather than the place where art is

displayed. Thus, the space demands the spectator to be present but only through the eye – as any "space occupying bodies" (1986) and the event of their occupation of space, may tarnish the disjointed illusion of display. The power that the wall holds according to O'Doherty made the wall an aesthetic force in itself in that the wall was now able to "artify" (1986: 29) work that was placed on it in a way that is described as adding to the depth of the art.

The gallery thus, becomes a space of ritual – a space that arguably creates its own *aura* through expressive authenticity and display value. It acts as mediator in time between the audience and the object of ritual by blanketing its own power over those present in the space. The space elevates the value that may exist from external factors, by influencing its *aura* as a sacred place for these objects to be displayed in, resulting in their association to elevate their value. This is especially true if we were to take into consideration Benjamin's take on the *aura*. The Gallery arguably from Benjamin's perspective is the only place in which *aura* can remain linked to an object of art, in our age of mass consumerist culture. However, the discussion of Benjamin's *aura* evolution in chapter 1 is a crucial distinction to keep in mind in this context. There has been a shift in the authority that an art space is perceived to put out. It can be seen in the division that has developed between high-end commercial galleries and art museums. Whereas museums are becoming less common, art fairs are flourishing as a result of commercialisation in the field. Once more, authority is shifting from the museum, which determines authenticity via specialised academic knowledge, to the art dealer, who is knowledgeable about investment pricing. While the museum itself still does have an effect on the perception of value within the space, its authority as a cultural knowledge base is being used as a false front in order to mask the reality that the higher culture of art consumption has lapsed into the age of commercialisation.

Chapter 2.3 The Curator's affect and the celebrity cult.

In 2019, a report was released by Corrigall & co. on '*The Top 50 Artists & the Top 20 Curators who validated them*' in the 2019 Contemporary African Art Ecology. The report looks at artists who have seen their work included in a growing yet ill-defined category of Contemporary African Art, curated by the top 20 curators on the continent over a period of 10 years from 2007-

2017.[5] Included in the report are celebrated names such as Zanele Muholi and Kudzanai Chiurai. In the report each artist is tiered based on how many times their work was included in an exhibition curated by these top 20 curators.[6] Curator names such as Koyo Kouoh and Azu Nwagbogu of the Zeits Museum of Contemporary Art were included in the report. (2019: 14-54)

Corrigall's report served to highlight the ecology of the African art scene between the period of study – both considering the environment of the art scene at the time, and how it evolved within that period. Taking into consideration both sales and frequency of exhibition internationally, the report serves as a vital insight into how these trends in exhibiting artists may influence the rising investment interest in African Contemporary Art globally.

What is interesting here, as it is with the gallery space, is the power the curators have over the success of the artists they consider important to look out for. Interestingly if we look at Prager's exhibition in the Corcoran gallery while keeping the curators' authority's nature in mind by noting the people associated with the gallery in particular, it becomes apparent why the exhibition in this particular instance was described as Prager's turning point as opposed to the others before it. The list of previous exhibitions in the Corcoran gallery is long but it includes names (that are arguably considered influential artists) such as Dali who exhibited '*Sculptured Jewels'* from February 25 to March 25, 1956, and Andy Warhol who exhibited '*Shooting Stars: Publicity Stills from Early Hollywood and Portrait'* between February 9 to April 21, 2013 (Corcoran, 2021).

Prager's *Face in the Crowd* exhibition was curated by Kaitlin Booher, Assistant Curator of Photography and Media Arts at the Corcoran (Boyle, 2013). Booher also curated the *'Shooting Stars: Publicity stills from Early Hollywood and Portrait'* exhibition in the same year (Rutgers,

[5] The category is ill defined as there is some debate around what constitutes Contemporary African Art: whether this is art made by those who live and work on the continent, work made by those born on the continent but work elsewhere or if this includes work by any global citizen of African descent. Such a broad category also presumes that there is some kind of aesthetic or conceptual content which would distinguish this kind of work as uniquely 'African' and thus different from any other Contemporary art.
[6] Corrigall describes the criteria that she employed in order to name the top 20 curators, which includes that the curator has "curated exhibitions including artists from different parts of the continent and thus have addressed/dispelled notions about African art as a category" they must also have "curated a biennale exhibition …, or have set up platforms, or created journals," as well as having, "had their name recur in our research and/or been put forward by many of the experts [they] interviewed/polled".(2019: 15)

2023). While not a big curator at the time, Booher still held the influential position at the Corcoran that resulted in Prager's exhibition coming to fruition. She worked under Philip Brookman, chief curator and head of research at the Corcoran Gallery of Art who gave her the opportunity to choose the artist for her first solo curation. In 2011 Booher had a chance to work with Paul Roth, the previous Chief curator of the Corcoran and now the executive director of the Richard Avedon Foundation (Russeth, 2011). Why I point this out is because it holds significance in the influence of curators on the success of artists and thus their value of their work. Why this was important in the instance of Prager is that it also showed the front created by the perception of the museum that hid the overall commercial aspect of Prager's previous work (in editorial). Thus, the museums as a space of authority and the famous artist masters associated with it helped elevate her work further into a space of higher culture without compromising the mirage. Corrigall only strengthens this idea with the assertion: "it follows the principle therefore that the greater the number of (influential) people who value the work of certain artists, the greater the chance their art will be considered valuable" (2019: 12).

A similar happening is applicable to the Pokémon cards and their rise in value. People of influence including celebrities began to spend excessive amounts of money on these cards during the period of 2020. In the beginning of 2021, the controversial YouTuber Logan Paul[7] purchased 1 million dollars worth of Pokémon cards (36 unopened first edition base set booster packs at $39,206 USD each) which he unboxed live for viewers (Li, 2021). In all these packs, he received what are considered 12 heavily valued cards, with his total card pull value being estimated at 2 million dollars. The trend of opening card packs live online to see what rare cards they contain, amongst influencers (primarily those on streaming platforms like YouTube or Twitch) had at that point skyrocketed. With the added factor of the 2020 pandemic and therefore more people at home with more time on their hands, this trend grew tremendously fast and the value of the cards grew with it. People started picking up their hobbies from when they were children and new collectors started entering the game hoping to gain wealth through the purchase or collection of a rare card worth hundreds of thousands of dollars (Marketplace, 2020). Thus, it can only be assumed that

[7] Logan Paul is a professional wrestler and social media star from the United States. He first became well-known on an app called Vine, from there gradually gaining recognition as an internet personality on YouTube with 22 million subscribers. He was one of the highest paid YouTubers in 2021 and is most recognised for his controversial antics online (Robehmed, 2018).

with the influx of mass demand from top-earners in the world of influencers that the value of these cards, then started to increase dramatically (Collider, 2021). This, along with the scarcity of older Pokémon cards, as well as an existing devoted fan base motivated by childhood nostalgia, only encouraged interest in the resurgence of the collecting value of these cards based on the hope for achieving a form of speculative value.

Chapter 2.4 Jean Baudrillard on Collecting

The original is challenged by the advancement in digital mediums through the mechanisms outlined in Benjamin and Baudrillard's studies of the multiple. However, while Benjamin says that authenticity cannot exist in a reproduction, Baudrillard disagrees and says that with mechanical reproduction, the reproduction becomes the authentic object "it is a cultural irony - but an economic fact - that this thirst for 'authenticity' can now be slaked only by forgeries" (1996: 84). Baudrillard conceptualises the functionality of the reproduced object in two parts "every object thus has two functions - to be put to use and to be possessed." (1996: 86) The value of an object increases greatly when it is possessed over when it is just used. The form of value is relational in nature where it becomes something desired, "an object of passion," (1996: 85) a possession of subjectively greater importance. The value of that object shifts from practical to collectable.

While it is arguable that both are possessed, the function here is that the value of an object, even with multiple iterations of itself, is given extra value by a subject. It does not matter if this object is only one of thousands or one of ten, if the object has become possessed as a collectible by a subject it has become "the pure object, devoid of any function or completely abstracted from its use, take[ing] on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection (Baudrillard, 1996: 86). This subjective value is dependent on a number of factors that affect the subject and their lives. This is relevant in the age of mechanical reproduction, because with the greater access to commodity and the object it is hard to value a single object that has many iterations of itself, especially when we live in a time where objects have, arguably, never been more accessible. If we look at it from this perspective then the multiple object is unavoidable, "the door has thus been opened to a mass of 'authoritative' signs and idols (whose authenticity, in the end, is neither here

nor there); the market has been invaded by a whole magical flora of real or fake furniture, manuscripts and icons" (Baudrillard, 1996: 84).

When reading into Baudrillard's implications of the object and the multiple (that of the reproduced object becoming the authentic object) we can see how that conclusion of a valuable mass-produced object can come about. This is furthered by reading into his perspective on the same object serving two functions depending on the person you attached it to. The value of the collected object under this reading can easily become equal to that of the ritual object. Its locality and type of authenticity has just shifted. This is most widely due to the advent of the digital. My study pays particular attention to this as the contemporary art world is not above trading in the multiple (or even the mass produced). What shifts is how the contemporary art world manoeuvres marketing around perceptions of value to disguise what is pure commercial interest. This is corroborated when Dutton refers to the shift from nominal authenticity to expressive authenticity and Benjamin from cult, to display value to mechanical reproduction. This implies that the art object in a sense became more accessible intangibly where the value seemed to shift to value that correlates directly with the prevailing idea surrounding the value of an experience and stories rather than the fact of the original object.

Pierre Bourdieu's theories on *Cultural Capital* and its generation create parallels for this shift in the way authenticity and value function in collecting. *Cultural Capital* is an example of relational value based on the hierarchies formed in society (Bourdieu, 1993). It is dependent on a person's homogenisation into the dominant ideologies of culture. Bourdieu talks about 3 main modes of *Cultural Capital* generation "embodied, objectified, or institutionalised" (1993: 119). The most important of these modes in the instance of object authenticity is the objectified state, which is measured by the value of the material objects a person owns, which increases or decreases depending on the trend/symbolic superiority of any one object over another. Arguably this is because there is no longer a dependency on cult value of the original art object because it has been removed from a space where the object was fixed (where it was known about but not seen) and given more accessibility. Thus, as the centrality of the object moves away from the gallery so too does its dependence on the original as we know it. Eco notes that:

> The poetics of the "work in movement" (and partly that of the "open" work) sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society. It opens a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art. It poses new practical problems by organising new communicative situations. In short, it instils a new relationship between the contemplation and the utilisation of a work of art. (2004: 22-23)

What Eco describes here is how artists' or art collectors' cult status has changed or developed. The emphasis has turned to how their influence may be utilised to affect taste in an age where social media influencers have greater influence over cultural taste than art scholars. Worth has now become directly related to economic value since market forces produce visibility. The reality that they are employed as marketing agents rather than cultural experts illustrates how sales and sponsorship generate visibility.

Chapter 2.4.1 The celebrity in collecting

As we have seen in Chapter 1 Hollander makes use of the celebrity's autographic mark's economic influence to manipulate fame as an economic driver. The celebrity has the ability to confer status on the art object as collectable. Collectors desire status by association in collecting. It can then be surmised from this that the object (in this case the art object) can not necessarily hold value in itself, but rather by the association with the celebrity status of the artist brand which makes it collectable as a status object- whereby it may confer this *'aura'* on the collector. Baudrillard's explanation of the model and series system that we see in Chapter 1 has a similar structure on the social level since both the series and the collection work to formalise possession of the item, or to make object and the perceived status of the maker as celebrity (which is thus conferred on the person of the collector as individual of 'good taste') more intertwined (1996: 91).

Chapter 2.4.2 Brand in collecting

The brand, according to Baudrillard, holds two functions which speak to the concept of taste. The first is to designate a product under the brand, the second is to "mobilise emotional connotations" (1996: 191). When the brand achieves the emotional attachment or 'brand loyalty' the object becomes more personal and thus, fuels a personal ego making the object a desired object:

> The collector partakes of the sublime not by the virtue of the types of things he collects (for these will vary, according to his age, his profession, his social milieu), but by the virtue of his fanaticism. And this Fanaticism is identical whether it characterises a rich connoisseur of Persian miniatures or a collector of matchboxes. (Baudrillard, 1996: 88).

The fanaticism of the desired object; the possession of it, Baudrillard explains, sets the object in line with the ego of the individual who possesses it. This is because the individual places the object on the same level as their own ego, making it more than just an object of function "every object thus has two functions – to be put to use and to be possessed" (1996: 92).

Chapter 2.5 Value creation

Bourdieu's theories on *Cultural Capital* and its generation add to this discussion by creating parallels between value generation and the cults of celebrity. *Cultural Capital* is an example of relational value based on the hierarchies formed in society. The symbolic value that cultural capital creates, circulates a sense of collective identity that is dictated by preference and taste (according to Bourdieu, one's cultural competence—which is influenced by one's status and at some level one's education—determines one's taste) (1984: 2). This speaks to how social constructs and ideologies may affect a person's subjective taste and thus value: "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (1984: 6).

Interdependence on the positions (producer, marketer, consumer) in *Cultural Capital* strengthens how the value of the object is presented and manifested onto the object and how it is perceived by individuals. This is then further fortified by the emotional connections of the public, who come into contact with the object. My practice uses this idea (as outlined by Bourdieu below) to generate value through the perception of status and emotional affect:

> Each position – is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position even the dominant one depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field; and that the structure of the field i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the

> structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the externa or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field. (1993: 30)

I want to draw attention to the fact that value creation in this way is comparable to playing a game. This game is team-based, and one's place within the squad is determined by which side one is on and who one is against. This is arguably clear from the vocabulary Bourdieu uses in this quotation, where he makes use of terms like "fields," "winning," and "gain of profits". The points one earns or loses are heavily influenced by how one navigates the fields. In this game, odds of winning increase if one follows the field regulations, or potentially if a field is considered higher in the hierarchy. However, victory is contingent on how one plays these fields, on elements such as who one is allied with, whether one is included in other teams, or whose teams one is in opposition to; it's a game of deception and interaction. When one gets the game right, one is rewarded since you are a team member who is regarded as investable, and so the effort and value placed on you is higher. Bourdieu notes the inherent class snobbery which determine the hierarchy of cultural value and taste:

> The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile … implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences. (1984: 7)

It is thus in the interest of those trade in what is assumed to be a higher class of art and taste to carefully disguise the element of their field which appears as a game, least it become obvious how much market forces, rather than academic knowledge or some more arcane formula of valuation, informs what is cultural influential and therefore worthy of collecting and preserving.

Chapter 2.5.1 Celebrity in value.

Similarly, Hollander writes about the Cult surrounding the individual. Hollander speaks of the cult of celebrity as one derived from American culture and viewed as "a sharply distinguishing form of hero worship as its precondition is to be well known without reason." (2010: 388).

Hollander's concept of the *Cult of Celebrity* gives insight into how the concept of value surrounding an individual can be manipulated to give further value to something else. A recurring theme here is that the value of something is not distinctly in what is created, but what the 'fame' surrounding its author has gifted it. In this case the object's value is lent to it by the status of its author and the authority of the space which vets this status: thus, its value increases and decreases respectively. The control of the object and its perceived value is thus cemented through the *Cult of Celebrity*.

Chapter 2.6 Conclusion

As we come to the end of this chapter, it is clear that there are a number of factors that affect an object's value as society has progressed further into a world of consumerism. There has been a noticeable blurring of the boundaries seen in object values both commercially and in high culture due to the increasing influence of mechanisms like branding and marketing. In the instances of Pokémon Cards and the photographic pieces of Alex Prager, we can start to see the shift in the art world, in which the tastemakers—who were previously associated with cultural value—have integrated themselves into the commercialisation of today's society. The act of collecting itself (within the art world) has resulted in a change in market value control that is more evocative of the collection value observed in commercially produced objects like Pokémon cards. This however, as the distinctions between what constitutes value in objects blurs, has created a market that operates in a similar fashion to arbiters of higher taste but essentially its emphasis is on sales even though there is an attempt to hide this. We can observe this first-hand in how speculative investment becomes an added incentive in collecting art where it had previously been in its cultural capital and collection by museums decreed by academic experts. The adoption of these strategies is the result of a celebrity cult emerging in a society dominated by social media influencers and brand endorsements. Tastemakers like the gallery have been forced to adapt in order to maintain the illusion of high culture through value and marketing.

Chapter 3. The Private Collection

This chapter elaborates on how I came to construct my body of work *The Private Collection*.[8] I go into further detail about the methods I utilised to create my 8 distinct artist characters, the Curator Cards, and the websites they appear on. The methods discussed include how and why I opted to visually depict my characters (on both sites and on the cards) in the way that I have (through simulation and archetyping), the mediums and styles I use, the tools involved with the creation of the body of work (such as A.I), and the manner in which I chose to exhibit it. I explain how and where I employ the themes of collecting, status, value conflation (economic, status, cultural value), authenticity, and the original to frame the project using the ideas I established in Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 3.1 Why the use of Simulation in *The Private Collection*?

The Private Collection is positioned inside a simulation of the paradigms of the art world, in particular, the commercial game of its institutions (galleries, art markets, and auction houses). In addition, the figures connected to the artwork simulate the tastemakers that emerge from these paradigms. As a result, I was left wondering how I might simulate a degree of collecting while still being able to imitate the game as it is played in the art world seriously.

I began to think about creating a representative site that could bring to light the "game" underlying speculative investment in art. This would highlight objects of art as an asset class, where the players who decree economic and prestige value (embodied via the Curator cards) became more prominent, than actual objects of cultural value. By creating a site that marketed the Curator Cards in a way that elevated them to an artwork status while still holding a functionality, was a potential way of exposing the underbelly of the collecting world in the art world. By using my characters as brand endorsers, they would simulate the marketing forces behind the Curator Cards commercialising them while still holding the pose of a high art status.

[8] The practical component of this submission can be viewed online at: https://the-private-collection.webflow.io/

The whole exhibition is designed around the idea of simulations which are created to be satirical in nature since they are supposed to be 'like but not quite,' as a way for people to start a dialogue around the manufacturing of elements within the art world including value. These simulations are hyperbolic and are not forgeries (although one could potentially take it that far). Therefore, I needed to consider how simulations are perceived in society and where I could draw on them to make these simulations (while satirical) still hold some of the serious values constructed around the marketing of artwork. I needed to create a platform that would be able to establish its authority by showcasing its qualifications as an art piece controlled by me (the curator and maker) and as a serious exhibition space for the simulation to be successful. This held true not just for the Curator Cards website, but also for its secondary purpose of the exhibition, which involved the simulated characters I created and the universe they existed in. They too, needed to credibly assert their status as prominent players in the art world within their universe while still being controlled by me in the background. This prompted me to look into other forms of simulations particularly those who posed as prominent figures or celebrities.

In 2017 the internet was abuzz with a search for the background and identity of the woman who was featured on the Instagram account called shudu.gram.(Figure 5) This search shrouded in no small amount of mystery saw her Instagram account boom in popularity, with famous celebrity personalities following her and naming her account an inspiration, remarking that it was good to see "darker skinned model[s] celebrated in such a way" (Fowler, 2018). Viewers of the account described the woman with “long limbs and flawless dark skin… [as a] mysterious beauty” (Fowler, 2018). As a result, prominent commercial companies, like Fenty Beauty, began to use the woman as a model in their own brand lines. With the surge in followers and recognisable reputation, it soon came to light, in an article by Harper’s Bazaar, that the woman was in fact, not a real person but a CGI model. The account belonged and was run by the fashion photographer Cameron-James Wilson who insisted that the Shudu was an art piece – a “celebration of a beautiful dark-skinned woman” (Fowler, 2018).

Despite being outed as a CGI representation of a woman (and garnering critical ire as not a real black woman but a white man’s projection and therefore puppet), the character Shudu still gained traction in the world of influencers (Jackson, 2018). On Instagram, to date, she has over

200 thousand followers and holds the much sought-after blue check verification mark next to her username, a symbol of validation and authority that all influencers strive to achieve.[9]

But Shubu is not the first CGI influencer to gain such a following. There have been many virtual celebrities that have amassed a following for their virtual talents. One such example is the Brazilian-American influencer Miquela Sousa (Figure 6), who goes by the name Lilmiquela, and has amassed a following of 2.9 million followers on Instagram since 2016. She has since released music singles on Spotify that have over 300 thousand listeners monthly (Jackson, 2018). All while being a complete computer-generated model.

At this time, I started to see a pattern in the formation of these virtual celebrities, where there seemed to be a tendency for these characters to be created as a way to cash in, in some manner, on current trends or talent. This is not an unusual thing to happen in the world of celebrities and marketing as we progress further into a world driven by social media and online personas. It can be witnessed in the virtual idol that emerged in Japan in the 1990s with the introduction of 'digital pop stars.'[10] The emergence of these stars took advantage of the advancing technologies and an already popular idol industry in the region. Virtual celebrities in Japan and Korea became an increasingly desirable option for generating capital (owed partly to the successes the region saw in the anime industry) (Kong et al, 2021: 345). This was especially true for these virtual idols, as in an ever-expanding music industry known for its constant controversy, the activities, look and branding of virtual idols could be controlled completely, making them less volatile than real popstars: “virtual idols have characteristics of a high income, strong plasticity and strong controllability” (Kong et al, 2021: 344).

Hatsune Miku (Figure 7), created by Crypton Future Media in 2007, is undoubtedly the most well-known Virtual Idol created around the use of technology known as Vocaloids. The anime style figure was designed to look like a young teenage girl with long blue-green hair. She

[9] Instagram uses this badge as a verification for confirming that an account is the authentic presence of the public figure, celebrity or brand it represents. However, this badge has developed into more and is seen now as a symbol of status rather than anything else.

[10] In Japan and China virtual pop stars who are commonly referred to as Vocaloids are trained to sing using text-to-speech software and are arguably some of the most successful virtual stars seen to date.

is a music idol whose voice has been utilised in innumerable tracks by music fans and major Vocaloid producers all over the world. It is estimated by Kazuaki Ibe, a consultant at Nomura Research Institute, that by 2012 the fiscal amount generated by Miku-related consumption had already exceeded 10 billion yen ($74 663 500 USD) (Sankei Biz, 2012).

As a result of her fame, she has appeared in several large-scale performances worldwide, both alone and alongside other genuine music industry icons. She was so successful as an Idol that, in 2014, she opened for Lady Gaga in her ARTPOP Ball tour (NBC news, 2014). Like any other celebrity figure, she has been used to promote companies like Google and Dominos as well as to model for fashion labels like Givenchy's Haute Couture, where designer Riccardo Tisci fitted her for the clothing line (Figure 8) (Remsen, 2016).

On close examination, these so-called "influential individuals" are simulations of fictional persons made and managed by real people. However, more often than not, these simulations—and not their creators—become famous and not necessarily for the things they produce. Synthetic characters like Miku and Shudu have a significant real-world influence despite being virtual; their reputation as superstars is undeniable, and as a result, their image becomes a brand. The fact that virtual sims may acquire the same personality and popularity as real people gave me an intriguing insight into the development of my virtual characters and how I can brand them in a way that is likened to the virtual stars.

However, as my research progressed, I began to notice differences in how audiences perceived and responded to manufactured celebrity and character creation who were presented to the public as independent individuals with real-life impact. This was because the renown of these virtual celebrities did not develop without debate and controversy given that they are not real people and that those who have invented them may be capitalising on social issues for their own advancement. For example, many of the individuals who had supported Shudu began to doubt the motives of the man running the account once it was revealed that she was a CGI woman. Shudu was developed at a period when concerns about the absence of representation of women with darker skin tones in the fashion industry were being raised. There is a trend for virtual superstars to frequently gain momentum in trends or in the wake of famous pop cultural phenomena. Shudu’s

inception thus, called into question Wilson's intentions (as a white man) of the art-work with people questioning whether “Wilson might be participating in this tradition of racial expropriation,” (Jackson, 2018) to benefit from social concerns and thus reinforce a white male dominance in the industry at the cost of real-life opportunities for darker skin models.

Similarly, with Vocaloids and Miku their reception from western audiences was mixed and it took a lot longer for them to gain any significant influence. Louise H. Jackson and Mike Dines observe how western culture has reacted to Vocaloids and the music they produce from an authenticity standpoint. They underline that there is a “fixation on the authenticity” (2016: 101) that prevents western culture from accepting these idols readily. This is due to technology used to synthesise the voices (despite the fact that they were recorded using real voices) further adding that these technologies acted “as a symbol of the death of the artist, [for] lacking in emotion” (2016: 101). In essence taking away from the ‘*authentic sound*’ of the human voice. Given the existence of Vocaloids in the music industry, this puzzled them from the perspective of authenticity, since the same accusation of inauthenticity could be levelled against the dubbing of actors in western music videos with actual singers and voice-overs. Rafal Zambroski in his article addresses how in a digital world we already do not experience the authentic (sticking with the theme of music) he rightfully points out that music today is mediated by some sort of device or software in the majority of instances that it is listened to. It seemed not to be the sound or talent that was the issue here. Given that not only the sound but the overall brand image of celebrities is carefully managed and at times constructed, Jackson and Dines then pose the question of whether the actual world requires confirmation that something is "alive" or not in order to decide acceptability, or in this instance authenticity (2016: 107).

The Western audience reaction to Miku’s collaboration with Lady Gaga was mixed, but it is clear from the collaboration with the recognisable famous (human) music icon that this endorsement gained more acceptance. It is noted that American audiences were disapproving of the inclusion of Miku before they attended and watched the show (many Americans had not even heard of Miku before). However, after she performed with Lady Gaga, more commentators thought it was a strange but enjoyable concept. The performance resulted in an influx of Google

searches for Hatsune Miku in the United States, as well as more engagement with entertainment pertaining to her on platforms like YouTube (Tokyo Otaku Mode, n.d.).

Chapter 3.1.1 The Celebrity

Having considered these case studies on virtual celebrity and its significance in *The Private Collection* as a tool for capitalising on the celebrity-driven brand identity, I had to revisit what Hollander had to say about the economics of the celebrity in order to truly establish my character's capacity for economic function.

Here I returned first to how Hollander observes that, "celebrities also serve economic functions: they are essential for popularising and promoting products of popular culture and they help to sell a wide variety of goods and services by endorsing them in advertisements" (2010: 390). Celebrities, by their connection with their popular status or the artist brand, have the capacity to raise an object to the position of collectable through their own influence. Collectors then, by association, desire to capitalise on this since the collectible object serves as a signal for the conferring of status. It does not matter if the celebrity is real or not, if they can function as an economic engine for value. The act of collecting, according to Baudrillard, is often driven by a desire for a conferring of status. It is not the work itself but the brand identity or celebrity nature of the artist which confers value and taste, "tastes are determinate no longer" (1993: 72).

If I were to market a viable economy successfully there was a need for *The Private Collection* to employ that type of celebrity economy to assign monetary worth to the objects available for purchase on the main card site, while keeping in mind that societal beliefs, aesthetic preferences, and character may influence how each visitor interacts with any given collectible piece. While a participant's interaction with the exhibition's collectible objects is dependent on how much value they place on the object associated with a specific artist, it is important to remember that the collection also tests how celebrity influence can often dictate taste. This is why these characters were designed to pull recognisable traits and aesthetics from known artists as a tool to elevate their personas as established artists, so they could attempt to simulate this generated economy.

This is where I refer back to Hollanders' *Celebrity Cult*, as it gives insight into how the concept of value surrounding an individual can be manipulated to give further value to something else. This allows the conferring of celebrity status to shift its *aura* to a product associated with each of the characters in a similar fashion to the *theory of planned behaviour* outlined by Icek Ajzen.[11] This speaks to what I have discussed in chapter 1 and 2 in relation to Hollander's explanation of the cult as a manifestation of fame for fame sake, where an economic engine extending from the cult of celebrity becomes the by-product of capitalist society I needed to thus consider how to develop this branding phenomena for my 8 characters as I would have to simulate that as well in order for this celebrity influence to take effect.

Chapter 3.1.2 The Brand

All over social media and advertisement, brand endorsement is littered with celebrities whether they be internet personalities, Hollywood A class, or sport stars. They all have a toe dipped into the branding world. We have already seen the potential of virtual personalities to achieve the same effect in branding, so it would not be unreasonable to attempt to elicit the same effect on the characters of *The Private Collection* having already laid out the intention to use these celebrities as generators of capital.

However, I was not necessarily looking to use the conventional means of branding through my characters, but rather, as seen in Chapter 2 with my example of Alex Prager, through branding their character as a metaphor for a particular familiar story within the art world.

While researching this, I found that applying '*The Theory of Planned Behaviour*,' as explained by Icek Ajzen (1985-1987) was fitting here, especially when speaking of cultural interdependencies – both through how familiarity and brand can affect people's tastes and choices. Ajzen observes that people gravitate to what they know and feel comfortable with through familiarity. He writes that "the theory of planned behaviour is an evolution of the theory of reasoned action that focuses on cases where users do not have complete control over the choice

[11] The *theory of planned behaviour* will be explained in chapter 3.1.2

but are somehow conditioned by non-motivational factors related to the availability of certain requirements and resources" (1996: 563).

This is seen similarly in the functioning of Baudrillard's explanation of the brand and its propensity to hold two functions which speak to the concept of taste. The first is to designate a product under the brand, the second is to invoke an emotional connection (1996: 191). Anthropologist Arjin Appadurai corroborates this notion of object value as a socially driven exchange, one that is valued around the intangibility of dominant social ideology and trends (1986: 6-16). This in particular (when we look at fame as a fuel of the economic engines) is pertinent because the application of this (especially in the sense of commercialising objects in the multiple) was what I was looking for in the marketing of my trading cards. This was because these cards were not going to exist as one copy. They are designed and meant to be re-printable (albeit in limited quantities and not on a mass-produced scale), and so in technicality they could not exist as a traditional original artwork. Their legitimacy (fame, authenticity and originality) came in the form of the associated celebrity that I was building around the characters.

Chapter 3.1.3 The Archetype

There are 8 distinct figures in the artwork from *The Private Collection*. When thinking about how I would make these characters famous (or rather reference recognisable famous types), it soon became obvious that I would have to build an emotional connection with the audience (either subtly through a deeper emotional connection or more openly by identifiable tells). These characters had to be created in a certain style, but they also had to find a way to convey hints of a more complex personality to go along with their appearance. This was crucial because it gave the spectator a glimpse into the characters' potential behaviour patterns—how they would behave alone, with others, in public, etc.—without really getting up close and personal with them (similarly to a person's relationship with a real celebrity). They also had to be intrinsically different from one another as they were designed to emphasise different (though commonly observable) tropes in the art industry, so that the end result was a character presented to the audience in a recognisable manner that served to create a familiarity for each person. This was where the archetype came into play.

It is important to note (before I explain the reasoning for its use) that the use of the archetype in this instance, communicates itself more through the Platonic notion of the perfect 'ideal form'. This refers to the manifestation of a textbook ideal of a particular type. Hence, when I speak of the archetype for each character I refer to the 'perfect' caricature or the ideal form, that a group of traits together may manifest into, to form a certain archetype that is recognisable to viewers.

The idea of the archetype is to portray the typical idea of what something is (generally a person) whether through visuals or a written description. I recognise that an archetype is quite a generalised way to characterise something as it is considered quite subjective in its interpretation. However, in the case of *The Private Collection* it became a beneficial tool for the widest possible inclusion of creating a universal trope for more people to recognise. This is because it offers a broad spectrum of association to the viewer through similar traits that may appeal to their own character or that they may recognise from experience. It is in this way that a generalisation of a certain type of character, has the ability to cause a generic familiarity. The familiarity would be strong enough to form an awareness of a connection through variables that an individual would relate to or recognise, while still offering the opportunity to let the individual fill in the blanks in the way they wish, while still holding a certain modicum of vagueness to allow more than one person to relate to it. Thus, we can see how the exhibition plays on the notion of Ajzen's *The Theory of Planned Behaviour*, each one of these characters possess recognisable traits that have been caricatured to visualise what this type of character would 'typically' look like, behave like and point to their sense of taste in order for an individual to relate to any one particular character.

I have also considered that when I speak of relating to the character it may not necessarily be from the view that they have similar tastes or personalities but that they may recognise in a character someone they are familiar with (in this case possibly a known artist). Accordingly, there would be a greater incentive to gravitate towards the purchase of any object associated with that character more than others (regardless of whether it is for humour, aesthetic preference or kinship), as it would further add to an individual's own tastes and ideals.

The archetype is therefore, the main spurring force for each of the personalities of the characters and it elevates how each one visually markets themselves, as if they were being placed under the archetype as a 'brand.' In this way I have created the artist Characters to perform their identity through a branded celebrity status as a way of highlighting how certain aspects and conditions can push the value of objects personally.

Chapter 3.2 The animated cartoon has a lot to teach the writer and reader.

Animation has become a more commonplace form of expression in the last 50 years, most recently becoming more recognised as "a medium. Animation is film. Animation is art, and it can tell stories that are gorgeous and complex, and that feel handmade by humans for humans" (Guillermo del Toro, 2022). This hasn't been without its struggles as the medium has been cornered into the niche of children's television toys and entertainment making it a form of art that has had resistance in its acceptance into the space of art.

In the instance of *The Private Collection* I aim to put that idea on its head and take what is expected of the medium and use it as a tool for a critical conversation about imagery, brand and cult value. In chapter 2 I introduced a discussion that hosts the idea of the gallery as an arbitrator of taste. This is especially true in the art world where the gallery becomes one of the motivating factors of value generation in the economy of the art world. *The Private Collection* aims to simulate that type of space and while doing so elevate a 'non-traditional' medium to a cult-like status.

The cartoon has been chosen as a main medium for the exhibition because of the association with its syndication and the functioning of this type of imagery. A cartoon is defined as "a simple drawing showing the features of its subjects in a humorously exaggerated way, especially a satirical one in a newspaper or magazine." (Oxford dictionary of English, 2010). This is important for *The Private Collection* as it means that more exaggerated features are used to help achieve each archetype illustrated in each character. But this medium is also used as a way to exaggerate the ridiculousness of how the art world functions through its power structures while highlighting the cracks in its facade. The cartoon plays its role here satirically as it does in any political commentary by the comic strips in newspapers. It acts as a way of juxtaposing the serious

nature of the art world and the ‘non-fine art’ nature of cartoon and illustration. Each of the 8 art world characters are created with this in mind and thus have the aesthetic of a cartoon. The satirical nature of the cartoon also enables me to articulate the archetypes of each artist and its association with the cartoon as a form of child entertainment and thus play on the syndication of toys through the Curator Card.

The collection of work is thus associated with the (often side-lined) cartoon-like aesthetic, which not only challenges traditional exhibiting methods associated with the art object but also takes advantage of its acclimatisation to the realm of childlike syndication. This was notable because it alluded to how the change in value creation has compelled the art world's value system to adapt and accept products that weren't previously seen as belonging to high culture. It makes public the evidence that the art world has been trying to conceal, in a market where tastemakers are more closely linked with a commercialised syndication than has ever been before.

The exhibition through this medium also explores the cult value that grows from these types of cartoons and animations. The syndication of children's entertainment when paired with ideas surrounding collection becomes an important aspect in *The Private Collection* as it acts as a valuable method for showing how our ego affects what we consume and value. Primarily it illustrates how ego impacts the functioning of a collection that can grow throughout the course of a person's lifetime, from as early on as the fixation with particular toys or television series, if we were to utilise collecting from the perspective of a child. As referenced by Baudrillard, when one gets older these childlike obsessions become seen as more sophisticated and change from play to hobby (1996: 87). This allows me to navigate the valuing system centred around the art object by broadening the idea of subjective value through the act of collection. As a strategy, it also places emphasis on the idea of play, which is a choice given to any participant in the exhibition. In the traditional gallery, the art object primarily is not to be touched at all. To touch is to damage. Galleries often don't want people touching the work because of the residue that exists on hands that can react with the material the object is made of (North Carolina Museum of Art, 2019). *The Private Collections* cards however are designed to step out of this box and encourage touch through the game (although it is entirely appropriate to play the game by collecting as well). The commentary accompanying the use value of these cards is that touch can also mean history through

their play and memories associated with the cards. The *aura* that these objects may then generate is through the physical residue resulting from handling or playing with the cards - essentially an inversion of the artist's autographic mark into the consumer's autographic mark.

Another inversion of Benjamin's theories I play with is his claims about the multiple. One of the main characteristics that the cartoon embodies is that it has the ability to be reproduced, its functioning exists in the multiple. Thus, the valuing of the cartoon is significant here because it begins to question what the marketability of tangible object value really means. The cartoon in itself is reproduced across millions of screens and seen by millions of people sometimes all at once. This is important because how can you create cult value from something that is not tangible but so widely spread? This is where the existence of the syndication of children's toys and memorabilia became the best solution for the question of the tangible by-products of anything digital because they extended the prospect of possession into collection. The cult has to manoeuvre itself in a very different way to accommodate for this type of mechanical reproduction in particular which we have seen evidenced in the way Benjamin describes the *auras* evolution in chapter 1 (now manifested to accommodate a digital world). *The Private Collection* has been created in a way to synthesise this type of value generation and create a simulation of what it means to collect for nothing more than a child-like desire for nostalgia.

Chapter 3.2.1 Who are the characters.

There are a total of 8 characters in *The Private Collection*. Andrea Florhol II, Madu Wolfe, Luca Kai, Atticus King, Briar Faye, Kenzo le Chat, Kapser Raven, and Unknown. They are all based on unique characteristics and archetypes. In this section, I'll present a few of the characters in ways that also show how I've used the justifications for my decisions and the previously covered topics of interest in my character-creation journey. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, these characteristics have been carefully examined by study of artist personalities who have informed, in some ways, the design of each character. To further inform this, I used stereotype lists from internet personality characteristic lists to fill out each of the characters' qualities.

Kaspar Raven (Figure 9) is an idealised character intended to convey the archetype of 'the mysterious one'. The mysterious one is an archetype based on stereotyped qualities, viewpoints,

and a subjective portrayal of a mysterious-like persona based on carefully chosen traits associated with this type of archetypal character. These corresponding traits make up each particular archetype as a whole. For instance, Kasper is intense, focused, and self-righteous. These traits also help inform the sort of personality someone with this archetype could possess. This character for example has been created as a photographer who works primarily with conceptual art preferring to stay away from the commercialisation of editorial photography. He, however, does not hold much store for the 'typical' artistic conventions preferring to exhibit his work in unconventional ways in an attempt to subvert the art world's institutionalisation. He may be self-righteous in his attitudes towards mainstream success and is potentially stereotypical in his choices to rebel or be deliberately subversive or obscure. He usually uses film photography, preferring the tactile, mechanical and romanticised nature of it, capturing images that reminisce a time before the digital. In this instance I have made this character male. He wears a raven mask and I have illustrated him in his personal darkroom. He is a smoker and wears a trendy Bundeswehr parka[12], with functional Timberland boots suited for his many photography excursions. Visually he is portrayed as this almost black sheep type character who directly corresponds with his traits to build this type of mysterious persona.

Madu Wolfe (Figure 10) fits the archetype of the critic/art consultant. As I've already explained, I've utilised qualities to help illustrate the personalities of my characters through their traits, but this is also helpful in the inspirations they offer for their designs aesthetically. For instance, when I was considering what qualities Madu might have as an art critic/consultant, I needed to consider how her demeanour may help inform her look. In this instance I wanted Madu to hold a reputation as a well-known, revered, yet merciless member of the art world. I built upon this by singling out traits that would inform this, such as the trait of persuasiveness and the ability to make or break an artist's reputation. From a visual standpoint, this was important in the ways these qualities helped me inform what Madu may have looked like. It was thus important for me to use methods of representation that would make this come across clearly. Madu is represented in the Madu Wolfe Association Gallery space (her own institution's gallery which is expanded on later in the chapter) with many pieces of art that reference serpent like images. She is seen smoking using a cigarette holder (a reference to Cruella de Vil). She is wearing a wolf snout mask (a

[12] A German Military Parka, recognisable by its German flag embroidered on the sleeve.

reference to the big bad wolf) and has the body resembling a snake (both of which are representational tropes that are familiar to many cultures as having metaphorical duplicitous implications) which is coiled around a large red stamp that has the word ‘approved’ embossed onto it. There are visual cues in her design that suggest certain implications. This was done in order to act as a signifier for a viewer. This is because a spectator may get a good understanding of each character's attributes by looking at their visual representational features (just as I informed an understanding of how they looked through their attributes) which may or may not hold different implications for individuals in different ways. For instance, this is representative of stereotypes that are supported by specific animal representations. In the instance of Madu, this is seen here through the symbolic representation associated with the snake as witnessed here in the Japanese proverb:

蛇の道はへび Ja no michi wa hebi.

Snakes follow the way of serpents.

[Set a thief to catch a thief.]

> Obviously about imitation, this proverb has a sinister aspect because snakes are often viewed as sly or evil. In short, this proverb is also about corruption. A gentler form of this observation about mimicry is ‘Monkey see, monkey do’. (Galed & Hashimoto, 2012: 26)

That is not to claim that everyone has this opinion about snakes. It would be completely logical in this situation for someone to prefer Madu as a character because they enjoy snakes and she has snake-like traits. But this is to emphasise that there exists various representational tools (while they can hold varied meanings for different persons) that affect symbolic meanings of representations associated with them through ingrained stereotyping.

At this point it is pertinent for me to explain that it was not intended that these characters be designed as human. While there are certain characters like Kasper Raven and Briar Faye (Figure 11) who mostly present themselves as human, their humanity is still, in part, shrouded by the existence of their masks (I elaborate on the use of masks later in the chapter). This makes it wholly unclear as to whether or not they are actually completely human. For all the viewer knows, their faces being hidden by a mask, they could very well not have faces at all or their masks could be

fused to their faces. Regardless of this, having these characters not completely present as human was crucial for me since, during my study, it became clear that there were frequently more barriers/reluctances in the potential adoption of any simulations of human forms. As can be observed in the political pitfalls in designing a character like Shudu, I wanted to avoid the same kinds of problems that come from creating virtual characters who mimic people, particularly where there are issues of representation and difference between my subject position and any person I might invent.

Looking into value projections, particularly those related to animal forms, it became apparent that it presented a more appealing avenue for design. The discussion I put out regarding Madu Wolfe's form shows how animals and other creatures have their own cultural projections that have also proven to be a better method for conveying archetypes in this particular case. Value projections are constructed using human characteristics and traits which are then projected onto animals anyway. People tend to anthropomorphise animals, so there was no risk of losing the intended relatability of a viewer through each character's characteristics if they were designed with animal-like traits.

For instance, this anthropomorphising is also seen in characters like Kenzo Le Chat, (Figure 12) who is placed under the Clout Chaser Archetype and is visually represented as a black cat wearing a white RipNdip (a popular skateboarding fashion brand) shirt and Nike Air Jordan branded shoes (his design references clout chasing, through streetwear know as 'hypebeasts[13]'). He is represented with spray paint cans around him, in a gallery setting with some of his work pictured on the wall. He is the only one of my characters to overtly show what type of work he creates on his card. This partly serves as an indicator to his personality traits, often feeling above it all but still seeking that approval from the cult. His traits include being bold, obnoxious and charismatic. These not only make up the foundation of the archetype but also inform how his artistic practice is affected by these sets of traits.

[13] These are people who wear trendy fashion and branded items usually streetwear brands such as Supreme and Bape in order to look cool and stay on trend - "A Hypebeast is a person who wants to be on the cutting edge of fashion and brand identity" (Gunner, 2022).

His representation as an animal tends more towards the domesticated side, rather than Madu's for instance, because he is a chaser of clout who likes to portray himself as differently as possible while still conforming to the box he is placed in. He is an ally cat who probably has a saucer of milk and a comfy chair to sleep in at home. This is referenced here, in how he has chosen to display the work that you can see on his card. His signature is spray painted directly on the wall of a gallery (a reference to non-conformity) with frames around each image (a reference to conformity). This is why I have chosen to personify him as a cat. The popular perception of a cat is that it is an aloof, independent animal who behaves like they are above it all however in a domesticated setting they still look to the person who feeds them. The implications of this for Kenzo is that he strives to conform in a covert way in order to succeed in the art world doing anything it takes to become liked while still being like a cat, who is domesticated enough to crave something from the power structure, in order to thrive.

Chapter 3.3 The Cards

To expand on the functioning of the collectable object, each artist is represented on a collectable card called Curator Cards. The cards are designed to work as a functional object, as well as an object that can be collected, pulling from the ideas outlined by Baudrillard (use vs collection value). This allows the audience to participate in the use and execution of the object's functionality by both giving the option in collecting and utilising.

Baudrillard's 'object of passion', in reflection of object theory is where I pull from in regard to the idea that "behind every real object there is a dream object" (1996: 117) which is based on the subjective inclination to collect something over another based on subjective experience. This is designed into the cards through the use of sets (these characters are from the art world) which use different visual signifiers of archetype and stereotype within that set to spur on the potential to collect.

The use function is designed into these cards as a function of play. This is to stimulate the idea of the game, both in the collecting aspect and the physical act of playing with the cards. This simulation is experimental and dependent on the audience interaction with the cards and if they

choose to play the game of collecting or the game of the gallery (referencing the actual act of playing a card game).

In exploring this I am commenting on the notion of the authoritative influence exercised on a participant in a scenario where there are two functions clearly demarcated in the functioning of an object. But the label of these cards falls under an artwork which institutionally should not be touched specially to play a game of cards with. This harkens back to the mechanisms of the influence certain establishments and individuals can have on a participant such as those outlined by Corrigall in chapter 2 (regarding the curator) and Benjamin in chapter 1 (regarding the art establishment). In this case, the authoritative influence is the curator (me), who has not only designed the characters (using recognisable archetypes) to be collectible through taste and experience but has also simulated the elevation of their personas in the art world (via my power as a tastemaker) to make them appear as if they are considered heavy hitters in the art world. This is designed to directly contrast itself and create a conundrum of typical art market etiquette as I am also directly stimulating the mentality that these cards can also be played with, as if they were a set of Top Trump cards. The value you choose to place on them is dependent on how you want to interact with them.

Chapter 3.3.1 The statistical valuing of Curator Cards

The character traits do not just serve as perpetuations of each stereotype, they also inform a valued based statistical system that I have set up for the whole set of character cards like those used in Top Trump Cards. (Figure 13) Top Trumps is a card game that was originally released in 1978 (Bomzer, 2022). The game comes in many different variations; a pack of cards will have an overall theme for example cats, superheroes, or cars. Each card has a set of numerical data on it based on different categories pertaining to the theme of the cards (superheroes have statistics like strength and special power). A player will play a card and choose a statistic to battle their opponent against. The goal of the game is to compare the chosen statistic with your opponent's card in order to trump and win your opponent's card (Top Trumps USA, 2023). Often it is the higher value of the chosen statistic that wins but some special cards may require a lower value or special requirement to win.

The Curator Cards use this similar type of value system as a baseline for the statistics presented on each of the characters' cards. This is a tactic used in order for the audience to better visualise their stereotype through traits. To do this I have created a scale of values that inform how each character's characteristics and traits alight with the value I've set, according to their personality.

In essence, I have chosen categories for each statistic that you'd expect to see in the art world such as originality, capacity to collaborate, number of gallery showings, skill and aesthetic. As an example, a character like Kasper has a capacity to collaborate value of 1 (Figure 14) because his archetype includes the characteristic of being uncompromising while also having traits that allude to him working better by himself, like preferring to work in the studio at night when it is quiet. While alternatively, Kenzo has a capacity to collaborate value that is subject to quotation (SQ) (Figure 15) which means that it is based on a certain value of another character he is put up against. This is because his archetype includes traits that mean he follows the most popular route or looks to others for clout. As such his capacity to collaborate stat rises or falls depending on the participating characters stat indicated on their card – in Kenzo's case it is aesthetic. Andrea Florhol II (Figure 16), one of the characters classified under the Queen Bee archetype has a similar special SQ value in the category capacity to collaborate, however, unlike Kenzo's, is based on category, the number of gallery showings. If for instance the number of gallery showings of the card put up against Andrea's is less than 30, then Andrea's capacity to collaborate value becomes 1. If the number of gallery shows exceeds 30 then the capacity to collaborate value of Andrea becomes 9. This is because Andrea's traits include only associating with people of influence, craving mass fame and holding a strong opinion of other people's work. This is similarly seen in the +1 Mechanic that I have included on some of the characters cards. For example, Luca Kai's (Figure 17) card (who is placed under the archetype the Influencer) gains +1 capacity to collaborate because one of his traits includes easily making connections (Figure 18). This statistical tally is not only used as a game mechanic, but it is also used to inform how each artist markets themselves, how they align themselves in the art world and the type of work they create.

The mechanism of the trait system and the archetype serves as a way not only for the audience to relate to different characters more than others (which in turn informs how the different

members of the audience interact with the objects the artists create) but also as a way to inform the categories of value for each card's statistics. In this way I am able to pull from The *Theory of Planned Behaviour*, and *Cultural Capital* to enforce the celebrity cult behind each of my characters by speaking to each of their individual egos.

Subjectivity not only greatly affects how each viewer will respond to a specific card, which in turn influences how much value they will place on that card, but it also affects how they choose to play that card among the other characters (if at all). That in turn draws from the egos of the characters creating a sense of connection through a sense of involvement and investment in the playing of the game (not only in collecting but also of the gallery politics).

Chapter 3.3.2 The system of valuing behind Curator Cards

Value fabrication in relation to the personal is a key theme that is seen indicated in theories of Aizen, Bourdieu and Benjamin to emphasise how a sphere of influence can affect the commercial decisions of an object's value. Thus, to further push the object's value I have inflated the egos of the artist characters being portrayed (as seen early in the chapter regarding my adoption of simulation). I have done this by including in the lore of the website's start-up that the characters are each introduced as autonomous and **real** creators. This is to enforce a celebrity-like status on the character which in turn gives more value to what they, as artists, produce. This is reminiscent of the virtual influencers mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, as well calling upon the idea of the virtual idol.

With my characters, like these digital popstars there is a 'puppet master behind them who controls the idol under the guise of virtual autonomy.'[14] By acting as the puppet master in this way

[14] In Japanese History there is a practice in puppetry called Bunraku which is known, "as a theatrical practice, Bunraku is a sophisticated form of puppet theatre, whose peculiarity lies in the visibility of the puppeteer alongside the puppets themselves." (Jackson & Dines, 2016: 102). This is relevant to my study as I take on the role of the puppet master in *The Private Collection.* The perception of puppetry in western popular culture (both in name and function) held some resonance with what I had envisioned and wanted to achieve. I, however, needed a more in-depth take on my role as this puppet master. This is perhaps better articulated by the craft of how I wanted to be portrayed but, didn't seem too align with the definitions of puppetry in the West. During my research I found that it did more so through Bunkraku, which is expanded on here: "In Western puppetry the puppet is "expected to offer the mirror of his contrary" (78), in which

I then hold the authority as the curator rather than the 'original artist.' As we have seen in the findings of Corrigall the curator is an authoritative power in the collections value and thus the continued celebrity status of the artist. The gallery is the space in which they manage and maintain a sense of power over value because it is a space that controls the fame of those who are allowed to exhibit in it.

Historically, the gallery space has asserted the curator as an authority in authenticity "indeed, much of museums' purpose …rests upon their perception in the eyes of the public as institutions where experts in the field organise, validate, and convey knowledge." (Longair, 2015: 2) In *The Private Collection* I play multiple roles as artist and original creator (behind the scenes) but also as gallery space by constructing how the characters market themselves and the objects they create 'under my sphere of influence' as the curator and marketer. This idea of wearing multiple guises reoccurs in the masks used for each character which are not only symbolic indicators to assist the traits of each character but are also a metaphor used to mask their true selves and emphasise their presence and *'aura'* as marketing tools. The character's main signifying feature, the face has been removed from the viewer's eye in order for the characters to perform their archetypes as celebrity: "A performer in a mask is obscuring one identity in order to embody another one" (Pollock, 1995). This is also to push their celebrity status in that their humanity is shrouded from the public perception and their status as deities is forced. In this way it calls upon the notions we have outlined in chapter 1 pertaining to the ritual and the figure of authority. While the artist is still primarily referencing the idea of an artist as genius it is also being used to call back to the idea of the object that serves as worship and therefore holds a degree of divinity.

Chapter 3.3.3 Curator Cards: Hierarchies of Collecting.

One of the ways in which both commercial art galleries and animated syndicated products inflate sales is through the production of limited edition or 'exclusive experiences'. With this concept in mind I have created two versions of each card; a normal version and a holographic foil version. Each character has a corresponding 'standard original' and a holographic foil version of a

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the caricature of the puppet affirms what Barthes calls *life's moral limits*, within the puppetry of the Bunraku the illusion is accepted and put to use; it is the shared notion that culturally locates Bunraku puppets as a precursor to the Vocaloid hologram Hatsune Miku and others." (Jackson & Dines, 2016: 104)

collectable card to act as a simulated art object. In doing so I am putting to the test the theories of Baudrillard, in the value distribution of the multiple as collectable object. This is to show that as the art world has grown into an age where everything has become so readily accessible there can still be the same value awarded to these objects that exist in multiple iterations of themselves as long as they fall in line with the mechanisms that can bestow that value onto them. As an example, there are millions of shoes on the market but brands like Nike or Christian Louboutin are able to sell their shoes above the price of non-branded footwear due to brand association. In addition to their standard high-priced branded footwear these companies will on occasion launch limited edition designs for an even higher price due to their limited run. These limited editions create a sense of value through the perception of quality, unique designs and colours. When considering how to create limited edition cards I needed to consider a change in materials used to demonstrate tactilely and visually a change in quality as most products do to show their worth.

The standard version of *The Private Collections* cards are printed on linen paper for both the back and the front, and they have a bond paper core which adds up to a total weight of 340gsm[15] when laminated together. Each card has been sprayed with an acrylic gloss spray to protect the ink, retain the colour, and enhance the slide if the player chooses to shuffle the cards.

The holographic foil edition of the card is considered a limited-edition item. This card is 'more valuable' and is considered as a rare card as I have only made a set amount of these cards available for purchase. These cards are printed with a holographic effect using holographic vinyl sheets making them look 'shinier'. The use of a holographic effect is not uncommon in the world of trading card collections. Generally, it is used as a mark that donates rarity to a particular card in trading card games. This method of denoting rarity can be seen in use in card collections such as Pokémon, Magic the Gathering and Digimon. They are often the most sought-after cards for people looking to collect. The back of the card is printed on the exact same linen paper as the normal card with the exact same core, making the weight the same, in total, as the standard card. These cards will have the same exact image printed on them as the normal cards. However, there is a third edition that is exclusive to only two characters (Kasper and Unknown). These characters are printed on cards known as the Black Star Edition cards and they are considered super rare. These

[15] Unit of measurement for the weight of paper.

cards are printed with images of these two characters that contain minor differences to the standard edition and the limited-edition cards, which is why they are considered super rare.

Unknown (Figure 19) is the character which is classified under the archetype ‘the dead one’. Unknown is the typical stereotype of the artist who only gains fame or success after they have passed away. With that in mind Unknown is illustrated as a ghost (Figure 20). Sticking with this ghostly theme, she only shows herself in the dark and thus ties into the story of her Black Star card as a rare limited edition (being dead there are thus only a limited number of ‘her works’ available). The artwork on this card shows Unknown as a ghost in the same setting as the standard and limited-edition card but at night because her ghostly form can only appear in the dark. The statistics for Unknown become available on the Black Star card, where in contrast they are not available on the standard or limited-edition cards.

On Kasper Raven’s Black Star Card (Figure 21) the artwork differs in that it now depicts his studio in the signature darkroom red light that the space is known for when the development of photos is in progress. This card is also printed on a different holographic foil vinyl changing it from standard holographic to rose gold holographic.

The reason these cards are different is because they are considered wild cards. For example, Unknown only gained fame when she died but the fame gained was immense and cult-like. She is, in a way, considered to have significantly more historical cult value not only because there are limits to her works availability, as she is dead, but also because she emulates the type of ritualistic value that Benjamin writes about in *aura*. The argument for rarity behind Kaspers' card is that the Black Star card is a technique of emphasising the manner in which commodification operates. The artwork of the card is just slightly different, but its rarity and value are exaggerated. This also attempts to draw from the conditions regarding prerequisites for success in the art market.

This card serves as a reflection on the influence that cult mechanisms, particularly those of the gallery space, have on how creative practice operates while also making further reference to the cult status of these specific cards. Through numerous strategies used in the marketing of the commodified product, they become the fundamental elements in how these works are seen and

valued. Only if you pay extra can you have Kasper in the unique foil version. In the case of Unknown, accessing the character illustration and information of this artist requires additional payment as well.

Chapter 3.4 The Curator Cards Website.

*The Private Collection*s Curator Cards game is hosted on a website that has been created to function like a high-end gallery or auction site but in an alternative way. The site has been designed in an illustrative and playful manner to correspond with the ideas surrounding the game as well as to contradict the manner in which the traditional gallery space presents itself as seen in the analysis of O'Doherty (1986) white cube. It has also been presented to mimic what such a site selling collectible card games may look like in a commercial setting. The success of the site is in its marketing as it needs to attract an audience and keep them engaged long enough for them to begin to connect with a character that they then may want to buy the corresponding card. The success of the product depends just as much on the success in which it is marketed. Which is an underlying truth of the gallery space as a whole.

In order to create this idea of a successful synthetic market for these cards I chose to employ tactics that I have seen on both commercial sites and on artists sites. I have observed that often there is some sort of indication of either sponsorship or some indication of collaboration through logos of successful companies that are widely known. At the bottom of the site, I have added emblems of various known institutions of art that I have tweaked to fit into the universe of *The Private Collection* (Figure 22*)*. For instance, one of the emblems is a spoof on the Wits Museum of Art logo in which the alternative becomes the Madu Wolfe Association (Figure 23). There is also a spoof of the MOMA in New York which I have rebranded for my universe as the Gallery SOSO. These emblems work as endorsements to the site and the product it is selling, further embedding the authority into the work itself. It is seen in chapter 2 how gaining traction in the art world is reliant, in part, from the institution. This is witnessed in Alex Prager's found success through the institution and its associations with famous curators, and artists as well as in Corrigall’s report on the success of artists in light of curator intervention. What is a successfully marketed product without a shop to buy it on? Art galleries and museums regularly have a shop in which

one may buy overpriced syndicated merchandise: a tote bag with the Mona Lisa printed on, fridge magnets of Impressionist paintings. One cannot buy the art, but one can buy multiple branded objects related to the work on exhibition. On the Curator Cards site visitors are able to access a shop and buy Curator Cards. They cannot, however, buy the work of the artists.

Chapter 3.5 Artists sites

The supporting sites serve as a glimpse into the universe of the eight characters, each of whom has their own personal site as an artist, critic, or collector. The design of these sites is more typical of gallery and artist portfolio websites. They are quite clean and as minimal as possible while still giving off that white cube aesthetic. Even for some of my charters who may seem quite out there and vibrant, like Kenzo, their sites are still quite generic in an attempt to stick within the bounds of display as a reference to O'Doherty (1986) white cube.

These websites have been designed to look like authentic artist websites, so while you may explore the work and perhaps find out where it is shown, you are unable to make purchases through them. This is to mimic something that is not too dissimilar from actual fine art websites, like the Stevenson gallery, where they will display images of popular works but seem to do this in order to push a sense of an elevated value, comparable to if one were ordering something off a restaurant menu which had a SQ next to all of its offerings. The characters' work thus maintains a sense of exclusivity as it is not widely publicised as being for sale. Price being only discussed discreetly with the discerning, approved collector in private.

Not all of the characters have websites. Unknown, for example, does not have a website because she is dead in the universe's canon. Although if you buy her black star card you would see that she actually does have a physical manifestation, but she is still not in control of her work. Her work is alternatively available on Atticus King's website, as he is an art collector.

Atticus King is placed under the archetype ‘the Collector’ (Figure 24). His represented form is quite gruesome, yet he is still able to command authority perhaps through private wealth. He is a salamander that has taken a toad's face, hands and feet and made them into gloves, shoes and a mask. What gives him away as a salamander is his thick serpent-like tail, his blue pronged

tongue and his cat-like eyes. He also gives off the aesthetic of a mob boss (witnessed through the classic car, sepia tone and mafia like fedora). These aesthetic choices make his character seem quite cut throat in order to parallel his profession (or to allude to a less than honest background for his source of wealth and therefore power). This is further enforced by his traits that include being shady, understanding the economy of value and being able to haggle. Thus, it should come as no surprise when one learns that Unknown's work, who is regarded as a Master of Art in this universe, is mostly owned by Atticus who has understood the money behind owning work by someone like Unknown. In this universe Atticus has possession of the largest known collection of works by Unknown. He also owns works from other artists like Kenzo le Chat (The Clout Chaser), Andrea Florhol II (The Queen Bee) and Luca Kai (the Influencer) who have various levels of influence in their fields of the Art world in the world of *The Private Collection*.

Another Character who does not have a website is Madu Wolfe. However, if you look at the bottom of each of the websites you can notice that her name is associated with all of them. This is because in this universe Madu is a famous art critic and curator who through her power and influence has started up an institution of art called the Madu Wolfe Association. The institute hosts artists and their estates as well as hosting actual exhibitions. This can be seen on websites, like Atticus', that feature information on active exhibitions and show Madus institute as a space where some of these exhibitions take place. Her institution logo is featured on the main *Private Collection* website as a featured collaborator and as a symbol of the website's validity much like Instagram's blue check verification mark.

Chapter 3.6 The Artwork of the Characters.

There are characters of *The Private Collection* who are collectors or critics like Madu and Atticus who do not produce work, however a conundrum arose when I considered that there are characters of *The Private Collection* that do produce art. This left me with a potential gap in my practice as I was endeavouring to make these characters (although synthetic) seem real in their own universe and it seemed odd to convince an audience of this with no artist's work to show for it. I knew that if I were to do this, that these artists would have to have very distinct work that

separated them from each other, but also served as a way to highlight their archetypes as artists. Thus, I chose to create work for the artists in their name in order to exhibit them on their sites.

Chapter 3.6.1 A.I in The Private Collection

Artificial intelligence (A.I.) started to become more prevalent in 2022 as sophisticated technologies that use text inputs to generate visuals became more accessible. New machine-learning apps included DALL-E 2, Dream Studio, Bing Image Creator, and many more, allowing easy accessibility to the general public. These generators simply require a user to enter a text prompt for the program to process into an image (Corrigall, 2023). This meant that the technology was extremely easy to use, to a degree that seemed like creating images no longer required specialist expertise in any area of image creation.

It was expected that A.I. art would begin to receive a lot of attention, and with attention comes criticism. Numerous articles are being published that convey people's displeasure with artificial intelligence, explaining the how's and whys of how this novel technology is threatening the artistic community. As with any new art-making technology, scepticism quickly spreads, which is to be expected whenever something new to the art world threatens to displace the existing ecology. It has to an extent been argued that "A.I art tools are helping to democratise art" away from the exclusivity that it has manufactured for centuries (Beyer, 2023). It became clear that this method of image generation was something I would want to consider for my exhibition, but I wanted to avoid all the repetitive rhetoric and focus on it rather as a tool.

The connections I saw developing between this fear and the power structure of the art industry made this panic intriguing to me. I found it interesting because there seemed to be a lot of criticism, particularly on the inhumanity of these programs. I then began to consider how I might use this to perhaps further my work. I considered the fact that my characters are already intended to be artificial. To avoid deviating from the characteristics and archetypes I had already established for them, I tried to have as little influence as possible on the work they produced while still managing their styles and subject matter. This is because, as an artist, I already have a style, thus

I needed a technique to mimic many styles in order to properly differentiate these characters from one another and remove them from myself so as to establish their synthetic individualism.

However, in my research the controversy surrounding A.I did not go unnoticed. While I was looking to use it as a tool that was usable in the same capacity as any other digital medium I still was conscious of the ethical questions surrounding the craze. There is some fear that AI-generated art may worsen existing inequities and prejudices in society, from the standpoint of its data availability. One of the biggest questions posed by the art community is regarding plagiarism and authorship. These fears have surfaced in the sense that these programs are taught using data fed from millions of sources, including images (artistic images). However, it must be noted that these arguments and concerns have only surfaced very recently. While yes, I was looking at working with A.I as a tool, I was also aware that the literature on the subject was relatively recent, and that while important, it was better suited for future research.

For the time being, I intended to concentrate on the tool of AI and its usefulness in my own practice as a maker, which was to simply create images that resembled recognised features of other images while maintaining a sense of originality for my characters. A.I seemed to provide a useful way to bolster what I am attempting to elicit in my characters (through artist archetypes) by demonstrating how simple it is to make visuals that may resemble works of art by real artists. A.I generators use machine learning data-driven algorithms to find patterns in data to match the key words and phrases you input (Walsh, 2023). The images that are generated, although being conjured at the press of a button, allude to evidence of ingrained stereotypes in the data itself (the algorithm can only put out as much as what it has available to it). It can be argued that A.I merely utilises this data to create these images, as the data is already readily available in what we produce and subsequently feed to the machine (mainly from the internet). This is done to draw attention to yet another aspect of the corrupt nature of the generic art world: how many works produced to be lorded in these spaces are, by the criteria of the art institutions themselves, merely generic.

To further illustrate my meaning in ingrained stereotypes of artistic works and to circumvent the narratives surrounding forgeries (although one could potentially take it there) I want to rather point to A.I's ability as a tool to combine images of certain similarities that speak

to a certain aesthetic (stereotyped aesthetic) because of the data that is already present. The point of this is that it illustrates that there is already an ingrained stereotyping that exists in data surrounding artistic styles and mediums that point to specific signifiers based on celebrity. When A.I is asked to generate a certain style, it takes from the most popular (most searched) data on the prompt you provide it. As a result, these generated images are not exactly pin pointable in the exact derivatives of where they are coming from, but they still bear a modicum of resemblance to something you may have or have not seen at the same time. The use of certain signifiers (that speak to ingrained stereotyping within artistic images that help conflate value) assist the viewer in interpreting images in a way that invokes meaning and recognition in different ways for different viewers. This is evident in the work created for Luca Kai, who is a textile artist. While in his work there are visual references to artists such as El Anatsui and similar textile artists, there is still a modicum of doubt about the precise origins of a particular source of inspiration for the style represented in the pieces Luca has in their body of work.

The purpose is that these images still make you think of someone's artwork; there are several signifiers in the generated images that remind you of how archetyping and stereotyping function outside of characters through functions that help promote particular trends and styles over others. There is an art market for a purpose. This was my reasoning for using A.I. as a tool to further investigate the notions of stereotyping in the sense of marketing. I can see how it is a helpful tool for exposing a niche (through variables like popularised search terms and search engine optimisation tactics[16]) in the conversation that surrounds value through tastemakers, particularly in art environments. This is because it exposes the hypocrisy of the art world, which is today rooted (discreetly) within a commercialised trade. As the art world becomes more commercially oriented, so too has the way it employs marketing and promotional strategies, albeit subtly (witness in its online presence and connections to online art markets like Artsy.net). Its use of marketing and branding strategies to promote value has evolved into a subtle underhandedness. Although it portrays itself as an industry that seeks out unique up-and-coming work, the market is always skewed toward a particular type, and nothing is truly unique within it. At the end of the day if we

[16] Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is a form of creating key search terms and action words that boost the online presence (visibility) of websites, posts, online stores etc to gain further audience engagement and traction (LaFleur, 2024). It is usually associated with a ranking system that allows these keywords and search terms to be boosted to the top of search engine pages.

were critical about artist success, it is just in the way they are branded through various power structures of the industry and stereotypes which help push branding agendas.

Looking further into using A.I as a tool, while I was reading through some articles to gain a better understanding of how I would incorporate it into my exhibition beyond using it for its ability to mimic styles (through stereotyping tactics), I began to notice that a fair few pointed out something that interested me. The New York Times story by Kevin Roose, *An AI-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren't Happy* (2022) discussed an individual who won an art prize at their local county fair after submitting a piece of work (Figure 25) that he had developed using A.I (he had declared that the item was generated using AI technology prior to submitting it) (Roose, 2022). As with all articles around the subject the discussion featured the same points of contention mentioned in most critiques on the subject. One can only imagine that with all the contention that surrounded the use of such a tool, people were not pleased with his victory, with many accusing him of cheating. This was regardless of the fact that one of the categories of the art competition was "digital art/digitally manipulated photography"(Roose, 2022). Regardless of the outcry it was concluded that he won fairly, noting that in light of everything "human creativity is still required to come up with the right prompts to generate an award-winning piece,"(Roose, 2022) and so he did not break any rules. This is where my interest peaked concerning how I would incorporate A.I into my exhibition further.

Corrigalls weighed in on the A.I controversy in her article *Does AI art present a new frontier or does it spell the death of the artist?* (2023). She talks about her experience using an AI program to generate some images. She concludes in light of her **inexperience**, that after generating a few images, artists and image makers' concerns can be alleviated somewhat, since these images frequently turn out, shall we say, '*wonky*.' (2023) From my experience, especially when trying to generate any type of human form from simple prompts, there are always inaccuracies. It was the fact that she acknowledged the existence of people with a talent for developing precise prompts for these programs that produce visually appealing images, which caught my attention in the article; even though she only mentions it in the context of sci-fi digital illustrations, but we'll take it. She furthers this by explaining that in order to get the most out of the algorithm and ensure that the images produced, actually look reasonable, there needs to be an understanding of the

parameters these machine learning bots are searching for. People who understand this know what phrases, expressions, and fields they must include in order to get the best result, referring to them as "seasoned AI artists who have mastered 'prompting' "(Corrigall, 2023).

I found this acknowledgement that AI prompting requires a certain level of skill affirming. This was important in considering that this technology, for the most part, has been shunned by the art academy, something I particularly saw as an opportunity to expand on in my exhibition. Having used these programs myself I could understand that the contention wasn't as cut and dry as what was being portrayed. Typing in a prompt for a generic image, "a film photograph looking over a movie house full of people," (Figure 26) produced an image, while interesting, that was a mess of faces. When a more in-depth prompt was used "a 35mm film photograph of a close-up portrait, elderly man, natural light, sharp, detailed face, magazine, press, David lazar" (Figure 27) the image generated was like night and day. If it weren't for me saying out right that this image in particular was generated by an A.I, then I have doubts that anyone would be able to mistake this for anything but real. It led me to think of this type of image creation as a tool. Access to something like A.I art generators is not that different from people having access to programs like Photoshop as there is still a level of skill required in creating the images. Not only that, but the idea of understanding, prompting and using that to the benefit of generating an image (some might say a replica) that may well win a prize is almost akin to the underhanded successes of artworks in market circulation. This is because it highlights the crookedness of understanding how the art markets may work and using that knowledge to favour your own benefit just like how successful prompting can result in an image that could rival art.

In this vein of thought, there appears to be a purposeful gap in the argument that persists in all of the controversy surrounding authorship in A.I art. People are condemning A.I because they believe that these algorithms are most likely utilising data from artists' images without their permission (which to a large extent is true purely based on the way they process data) (Beyer, 2023). However, within the art-world it is not new that authorship is skewed. Many artists have been known to employ the services of others to create their work. Corrigall acknowledges that many artists do this and then not give credit to others involved, although the resultant artwork is still marketed under the artist's own authorship: "most artists in the regular real art world from

William Kentridge to Igshaan Adams – rely on groups of people to make their art and rarely, if ever are they credited as co-authors" (Corrigall, 2023). With this in mind, I'd like to draw attention to the art academy's hypocrisy. While I can see why there are ethical issues about this approach of making art in this manner, it just seems quite dishonest for the art industry to dismiss it on the premise of authorship just because there is no prominent name plastered on the piece.

This questionable uproar on the foundations of purely authorship (I do consider that the ethics surrounding the possible use of images without proper credit is questionable regardless but understand that at this stage as a public technology it is still too new to adequately, comment on without further research done on its data capturing methodology) provided me with the theoretical foundation I needed to use a tool like this to construct my parallel universe, which would effectively serve as a false front for a legitimate space in the art world by enabling me to produce works that felt appropriate and like they belonged there. It also allowed me to look into originality within the art academy. This allowed me to expose the art world's duplicity and the way it allocated value in its trade. It's a way of underlining that the work and value that these art galleries trade in isn't as awe-inspiring and unparalleled as they say, but it's also, with the right-prompts (AI) or the right other marketing tools (commercial galleries and curators) very readily reproducible.

Conclusion

I have maintained throughout this paper that value generation has seen a significant shift especially in the art world, as a reaction to the persistence of commercialisation that continues to develop in our modern world. The aim of the artwork in *The Private Collection* was to satirise and expose the covert way in which value is structured within the art world (as a result of the bleed of consumerism), to expose the artful way in which it has been able to maintain its sense of high culture in a world where Instagram artists and celebrity personalities become influencers of value placed on objects. I explored this shift through Benjamin's *aura* and ideas that surrounded authenticity. I focused on the premise that recent changes in popular culture are creating new tastemakers in the contemporary art scene, which are challenging established notions of authority and expertise and thus how we as society are able to understand the value in authenticity.

Authentic value seems to have become dependent on factors relating to tastemakers through the power of commercial influence, evolving to rise to the occasion of a consumer-based culture, as power has shifted from the museum, (which served as the arbiter of authenticity through expert academic knowledge) to the art gallerist, (who is an expert in investment prices). The current state of the art market reflects the commercialisation that has crept into the realm of art. This is evident in the uptake of speculative investment into art markets where it was once for collection or cultural gratification. Current popular culture and rising trends (seen in social media influencers and brand endorsement) have in recent years had a significant impact on artistic worth as I discussed in relation to Pokémon Cards and Alex Prager, which represents a significant deviation from long-standing paradigms for valuation within the space. As society moves closer to consumerism value, we have become less concerned with the actual object (whether it be in its originality, how it is made or who it is made by) and more focused on the influencing factors that may imbue value onto it by tastemakers (brand, industry giants, celebrities).

Indeed, this shift illustrates how cultural worth has begun to intersect with financial worth in today's highly interconnected global economy. This is shaped by rapid advances in digital technologies such as social media platforms that promote online communities who hold a significant amount of influence around the world (often in brand). As the art world adapts to these

changes, understanding the evolving role of influence and its impact on the development and circulation of value within the art world will become more essential. Those involved in the art world have had to evolve into marketing strategists and develop their presence in the industry as something akin to brand. This is clearly witnessed in strategies that involve the uptake of marketing into space like the gallery where in the past their cultural influence had been enough to maintain value structures. My artwork *The Private collection* only serves as a way to expose this shift as it has in a way come about in a covert manner but persists in its industry to remain exclusive.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Goldin Auction, (2020). '*1999 Pokémon Game #4 Charizard - Holo, 1st Edition – PSA GEM MT 10*'. (photograph). (Source: Goldin Auction, n.d.)

Figure 2: Alex Prager, (2008). '*Eve*'. (photograph). The Big Valley Exhibition (Source: Alex Prager Studio, n.d.)

Figure 3: Alex Prager, (2010). *"Crowd #1 (Stan Douglas)"*. (photograph). The Long Weekend Exhibition and The Face in a Crowd Exhibition. (Source: Alex Prager Studio, n.d.)

Figure 4: Alex Prager, (2013). *'Crowd #3 (Pelican Beach)'*. (photograph). Face in The Crowd Exhibition. (Source: Alex Prager Studio, n.d.)

Figure 5: Camron James Wilson, (2017). '*Shudu, Fenty beauty Collaboration'*. (CGI image). (Source: Camron James Wilson)

Figure 6: Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou, (2022). '*Lil Miquela (Miquela Sousa)'*. (CGI image). (Source: Lilmiquela Instagram, 2022)

Figure 7: Crypton Future Media, (n.d.). '*Hatsune Miku'*. (digital illustration). (Source: Crypton future media Inc.)

Figure 8: Robert Fairer, (2014). *'Hatsune Miku in Givenchy Haute Couture with the designer, Riccardo Tisci, at the Paris Studio'*. (photograph). (Source: Vogue, 2014)

Figure 9: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Kasper Raven (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

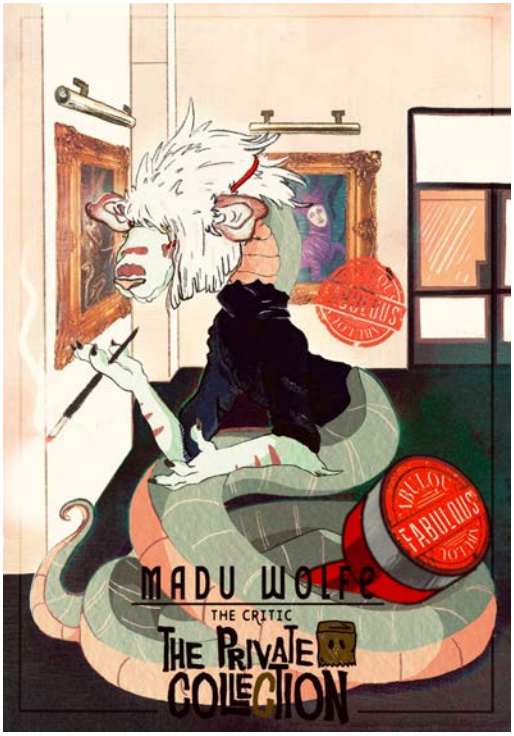

Figure 10: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Madu Wolfe (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 11: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Briar Faye (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 12: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Kenzo le-Chat (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 13: Top Trumps, (2020). *'Dinosaurs Edition Card Game Statistic Example'*. (digital illustration & digital print). (Source: Hopkins, n.d.)

Figure 14: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Kasper Raven (back)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 15: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Kenzo le-Chat (back)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 16: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Andrea Florhol II (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 17: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Luca Kai (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

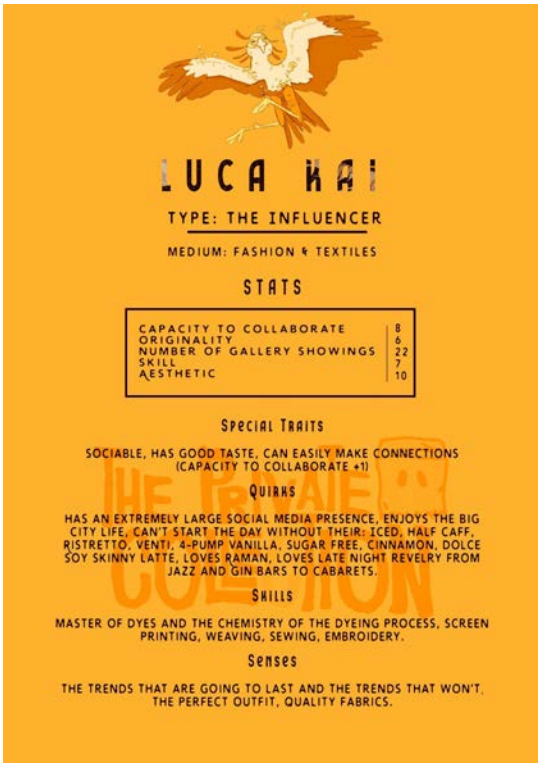

Figure 18: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Luca Kai (back)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

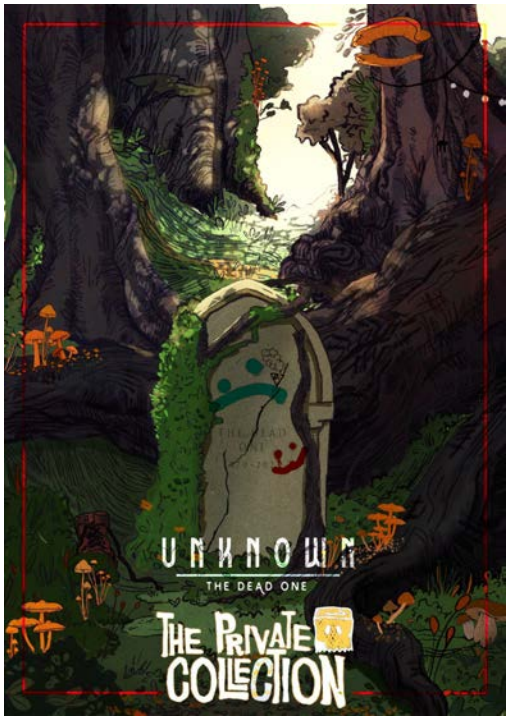

Figure 19: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Unknown Standard (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 20: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Unknown Black Star(front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 21: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Kasper Black Star (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

ZEITZ GEIST

GALLERY SOSO

Figure 22: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Zeitz Geist & Gallery SoSo*'. (digital illustration). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 23: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Madu Wolfe Association*'. (digital illustration). The Private Collection Exhibition

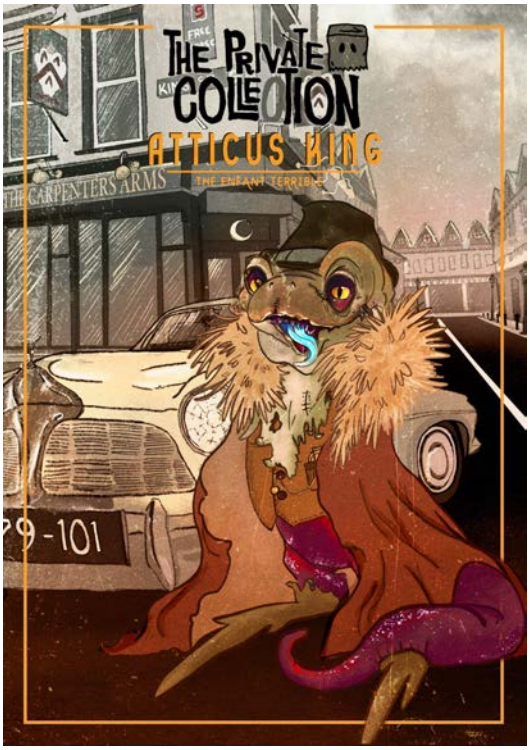

Figure 24: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*Atticus King (front)*'. (digital illustration & digital print). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 25: Jason Allen, (2022). *'Théâtre D'opéra Spatial'*. (AI generated image) County fair AI prize winner. (Source: Kevin Roose, 2022)

Figure 26: Yvette Ellis, (2023), *'A film photograph looking over a movie house full of people'*. (AI generated Photograph). The Private Collection Exhibition

Figure 27: Yvette Ellis, (2023). '*A 35mm film photograph of a close-up portrait, elderly man, natural light, sharp, detailed face, magazine, press, David lazar*'. (AI generated Photograph). The Private Collection Exhibition