

Art and Money—Book Review

[Art Journal](#), [Summer, 1996](#) by [Hannah Feldman](#)

Marc Shell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 229 pp.; 9 color ills., 100 b/w. \$35.00

The past few years have brought a veritable flood of books examining the relationship between art and the market as manifest in exhibition, distribution, and collection practices. Many of these scholarly enterprises want to argue against the supposition—born first in Kant's writings on aesthetics and later revitalized through the doctrine of high modernism—that true artistic practice remains immune to economic concerns. However, as the very proliferation of this kind of scholarship demonstrates, many of these books fail to successfully interrogate the theoretical separation between art and commerce their authors want to protest.

In distinction, two recent contributions to the burgeoning micro-field of critical inquiry that we might call economic aesthetics stand apart. Carol Woodmansee's *Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* and Marc Shell's *Art and Money* both work backward, trying to locate the origins of the troubled, often concealed, relationship between art and money. Rather than merely present, or better, analyze the effects of the market on certain artists or art movements as most of their colleagues have contented themselves in doing, Shell and Woodmansee, in radically different ways and through exceptionally different models, set out to expose the interrelated structures of art and money from the very moments in which they were forcibly set apart.

Woodmansee's interest in the question of authorship serves the larger purpose of wanting to interrupt or "reread" the standard history of aesthetic philosophy where the transition to upholding aesthetics qua aesthetics has been understood as a continuation of the natural progression of human thought. This "progressive" thinking, manifest in aesthetic theory as it was born in Germany during the late eighteenth century, redefined Art, or the fine arts, as that conglomeration of activities—painting, sculpture, dance, architecture, and so on—joined by the common pursuit of beauty and not, as it had been postulated previously, usefulness. Instead of rehearsing the standard celebration of this reconfiguration of the arts as evolutionary rather than revolutionary, Woodmansee, through elaborately outlining some of the pecuniary issues surrounding the profession of writing, illuminates what she calls "the underlying motives for the momentous conceptual change that gave us 'art'" (p. 5). Using the writers' own stated concerns about money, she demonstrates how this change was motivated by the imperative of earning a living.

Through the stories she tells about the difficulties of publishing and distributing the work experienced by those whose ideas Kant would eventually parrot, Woodmansee makes the reader see that the effort to define the author (and painter alongside him) as an original

genius, an invention held onto by dominant critical practice well into this century, was not in fact the result of an enhanced appreciation of beauty and worth. Instead, in order to generate an income, they authors had to claim their work as unique to justify the development of copyright laws that might ensure the financial rewards of their labor. The exposure of this relationship becomes relevant to art historical concerns when we remember that it was the effort of these early aestheticians to elevate the writer to the level of author that led to the reification of art as a fine practice, perfected by very few, and capable of realizing great vision, great truth, and great beauty. In this conceptualization, the work of art and the artist who made it acquired the mantle of autonomy subsequently celebrated throughout modern art criticism and practice. Whereas from within this tradition many have claimed this autonomy extends to commercial concerns in particular, Woodmansee provides proof that the declaration of art's autonomy was itself born out of the same financial concerns it sought to escape. In this sense *The Author, Art, and the Market* provides a profound contribution not just to the history of aesthetic theory, but to the entire way in which we have been trained to separate art from money in the first place. By exposing the original motivations for defining art as it has been for the past two hundred years, Woodmansee's account allows for a rewriting of that definition, or at least for a serious look at its implications for contemporary criticism and practice.

Marc Shell's *Art and Money*, although very different, also focuses on the incontrovertible tie between art and money. Shell's primary insight arrives in his doubled insistence that art, as a representational practice, is always already like money, and that money—also a representation of something which, since the abandonment of the gold standard, no longer exists—is always already like art. Elaborating on more standard ideas of mimesis, Shell proposes that representation is an exchange wherein one thing is substituted for another. This provocative hypothesis, supported in part by a relatively weak discussion of Magritte's famous *This Is Not a Pipe* (1926), allows Shell to reconceptualize representational practice as necessarily wed to larger systems of exchange of which commodity circulation remains but one. For instance, Shell locates this kind of exchange within western theology in the Christian doctrine that explains Christ as the Word made flesh and then subsequently, through transubstantiation, flesh made into communion wafer. Following the analysis of this tenant of Christianity as embedded within a logic of exchange, Shell explains the Christian aversion to pecuniary matters as based on the need to make Christ the only object both real and representational. By highlighting this contradiction, Shell presents a model for understanding the resistance to accepting the relationship between art and money that has so dominated the history of modernist art.