

## **1 Circulation: an introduction**

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### **Preamble**

In various catalogues or spoken curatorial statements from time to time one can come across indications like: ‘Artists are the currency of curators’, or ‘Curators are the medium of art circulation, they valorize what are the objects to be exchanged as art’.

Circulation may be viewed, or marked, in at least two ways: as the objects in a transacted exchange, and as the process of that transaction itself. The direct circulation is abstract and circular between positions in a transaction process, and indirect circulation may be seen as a movement due to a shift in the position of the observer. This predicts what [object?] is coming back, or indicates what values are being created in the process of transaction. For transactions involving art, artists function as producers and primary valorizers, and curators may act as aristocratic aesthetes, merchants, design stylists or the blind operators of the hidden hand of cultural market valorization.

Artists, curators and art historians deal with propositions about circulation in their everyday professional lives to help them interpret their own actions. But they do not always examine what are all the interpretive consequences of the models of circulation they deploy. The workshop was intended to focus on some such models developed within art history and theory, or on other models and situations whose explication was invited from outside the discipline, in order to clarify their further implications.

Understanding Circulation in Art and from an art historical perspective involves two levels of analysis: the description of the phenomena involved and the kinds of models applied or derived to interpret these.

One can simply engage the first level by listing what is circulated: Economic Goods, Physical Objects, ‘Art’ Works, Money, Ideas, Signs, People [in specific categories which are usually functional occupations: artists, gallerists, curators, art critics, collectors etc], Images [of any of the above: many ‘art’ magazines now include a gossip page about the social doings of the art world with photographs of leading actors rather than leading art works]. What this list defines is that ‘art’ is a particular kind of social nexus with its own specific characteristics. The phenomena art involves stretch off into many directions or domains of social functionality through this list of what circulates.

A related descriptive analytic is to ask where or through where this circulation takes place. It places the circulation of art in multiple sites, and forces us to define between which sites the circulation takes place. Seen from one site the next site may be unknown or merely a black box, the further circulation beyond which is of no concern to the site from which the movement takes place. This uni-directionality of a presumed flow may construct what may be called the functional connectivity of circulation, the assumption, logically weak as it may be, that whatever flows *from* here will flow *to* somewhere else, and may very well, over different times and spaces, flow *back* here. But the common assumption in most conceptions of circulation is that what flows in one direction [artists, art works, curators] will be linked to, if not the cause of, a flow back to here in a different but related domain [money, esteem, other goods in lieu].

The sites through which works flow may be artists’ workshops, educational structures, collections, exhibition institutions. More abstractly these may be structures of taste, as well as non-material spaces which are now digital and perceptible to the eye but not directly tangible to the hand, thus disturbing if not also subverting conventions of haptic

illusionality. This analytic can become a kind of auto-critique of the notion of levels, or their classification, but the notion of site[s] of circulation forces us to question the window or frame through which we view the circulation and identify its features. It places into a relational, unmotivated position all of the units of analysis which we habitually identify and naturalize if we accept the structure of relations, often linked to if not identical with those of economic power, which allow flows to take place.

A notion of site also shifts our attention to what happens there, to a series of processes and their inter-action rather than a number of discrete events [works, artists] and their implosion into chronologically arranged history. Art history then takes its place along other modern historical sciences which are more concerned with process or problem than event. Events and chronologically ordered series do not disappear they become the indicators for problems and the processes which those problems reveal.

### **Models used to explain circulation**

How are we to explain circulation? Art History like most Human Sciences tends to define or accept as natural what its units and levels of analysis. These are a given of applied art historical workshop practice, and they choose to apply any other relevant tools they can find them to develop and generate new meanings. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the Human Sciences have continued to provide new hermeneutic models which interpret their specialist fields.

The disciplinary fields where they may be found are very broad.

As an outsider to Economics I am now going to look briefly at some economic ones. In the economics of Smith in the 1770s appears the notion of circulation as a necessary transfer of value between what is consumed immediately, what generates revenue without

changing hands, and what generates revenue by changing hands, chiefly by the circulation of goods and money. [Smith, 375-378]. The concept is of a kind of fill-up process for what is depleted, value being transmuted by the processes applied to change circulating into fixed capital. Marx (whose theories of value I do not find plausible, despite their critical attractiveness), writing about ninety years after Smith in the 1860s, postulates the same kind of replenishment process between fixed and circulating capital. Only Marx articulates this process through his notion of commodity which is an abstract state between purchase and sale and suggests a caesura in the process of circulation that occasions a crisis, a breakdown in the system, or the potential for one. [Marx, 1867, 200-201 from *Theories of Surplus Value*]. Both these very different economic and social thinkers provide art historians with two valuable notions for understanding circulation: a relationship where the present replenishes and adds to the past, and where crises of evaluation can take place when there is a gap between what a system [of aesthetic] values a work as and what it goes on to value it as after that first valuation, it being accepted that 'values' are not of one kind and many are not monetary ones. [Throsby, 2001, 29]. The Marxian notion of commodity indicates that there is a permanent relationship between the two evaluations which is always in danger of breaking down. Some later economists thinking of cultural goods draw a distinction between cultural commodities having an existence as private goods and therefore a market, and some as public goods for which there are no observable prices. [Throsby, 2001, 23]

Other economists like Keynes, who was personally very involved with art, pointed to another relationship which goes far to explain stability and instability in economic

systems, the feedback processes between the marginal propensity to consume and the marginal efficacy of capital measured in output. Keynes also makes a very sophisticated distinction between the large proportionate and the small absolute effect of a given percentage change in investment where there is a high average propensity to consume [Keynes, 1936, 125]. In art this might mean, by analogy, that the larger the number of new art works being produced in any art system, the smaller relative the effect in terms of the number of the audience influenced by such a change, where many people already had the tendency to view new art in exhibitions, or buy it.

But it may be in the theories of money rather than production, saving, and distribution, that the models provided by economics are most relevant to understanding circulation in art. This is unsurprising because art works and even artists [as a person selling a type of favour by their celebrity presence] are used *as* a form of money. That is they function as a material currency by which value, usually monetary, is transferred from one site to another, often with an apparent increase in value. Favours, goods, money, life-opportunities are exchanged in the opposite direction.

In the 1920s to 1940s, if the absolute trans-economic unit [e.g. international], exchangeable value was abandoned with the gold standard, then relative value between monetary currencies could only be achieved by relativised demand for the currency most efficacious as a transferrer or circulator of value. In art the only thing approaching a gold standard is the scarcity value of works of art considered great, or the exclusivity - even monopoly - of social esteem acquired by a patron through the presence of living artists considered great which frequently accompanies the moment of social transfer of their works.

The anti-inflationary measures of central bankers now in the 2000s ensure the relative value of their currency is only defended within certain limits for restricted periods of time. In like manner, curators and some art dealers, so this train of thinking might go, keep attention on artists considered great only insofar as the demand for them is maintained by a peer group of other assessors functioning like an inter-central bank consensus to maintain the value of their currencies, i.e. the artists and their works who they hold, appraise, circulate, or sell. The valuing and devaluing of 'master' artists, like 'master' works, strikes curious analogies with the measures used to defend against currency inflation. [Galbraith, 1976, 156-173]

Indeed the notion of relativities between currencies being set by a banker's meeting, is one of an arbitrary exchange based on local knowledge of multiple markets. The bankers' meeting to set inter-currency rates or discount promissory bills has a long history and is found at least as early as records of the exchange rates fixed by a small club of bankers at Piacenza in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. [Braudel, 1982, 91] This meeting and its economic functions is a hermeneutical model for the importance of artists and their works being set in curator's informal and non-public conversations. Further, economists working on art markets have noticed the directly oligopolistic marketing behaviour of art dealers, often in a club with a restricted number of entrants who attempt to prevent the entry of new dealers. They also preserve their market control over a limited number of patrons by their own restricted selection of artists [Singer, 1988] One has to be neither a contemporary art dealer nor a specialist economist working on art markets to see similar phenomena in even so small an art world as that in Sydney in the 2000s.

I have only mentioned above ideas derived from Economics and Economic History which may be amended and improved by those more specialist in future. But they indicate a range of models we may use. The rest of the presentations in the workshop presented notions of circulation current in Art History, Genetics, Stock Market Operations, Cultural Anthropology, Semiotics & Linguistics, Fashion Studies, Critical Theory, Cultural Studies, and Curatorial Practice. They collectively indicate how rich the notion of ‘circulation’ may be, how widely found it is in the Human Sciences, and how much we may learn from all of these in providing models for art historical understanding.

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