

Chapter 3: Seeing the Value in Art

- Monetary Value vs. Intrinsic Value
 - Monetary value can be determined through a wide range of factors.
 - Intrinsic value is more subjective and frequently under intense debate.
- Art and Its Reception
- Art, Politics, and Public Space
 - Art in “public” vs. “private” spaces
 - What role does politics play in the making and reception of art?



Sylvie Fleury, *Serie ELA 75/K*
(*Plumpity... Plump*), 2000

Gold-plated shopping cart,
Plexiglas handle with vinyl
text, rotating pedestal mirror

Commentary on the art
market and comodification of
art (\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ and
collectors)

Monetary Value

The cliché of the “starving artist” is well known. The art market, and high cost and sales of some artworks, can be surprising. It’s important to note that the majority of artwork does not sell for millions of dollars, and that often those high prices are not for living artists. Additionally, a single artist does not receive the entire sum of a sale- it is often split with a gallery, or an auction house.

The Art Market and Collectors

The art market depends on the participation of wealthy clients through their investment, ownership, and patronage.

Patronage is the support, encouragement, privilege, or financial aid that an organization or individual bestows to another. In the history of art, arts patronage refers to the support that kings, popes, and the wealthy have provided to artists such as musicians, painters, and sculptors.

Today, the world's major financial centers also support museums and galleries. Art galleries bring artists and collectors together. Collectors may purchase artwork as an investment, which is risky. Often, what motivates collectors is the pleasure of owning art and belief in a particular artist (though prestige is especially important to corporate collectors).

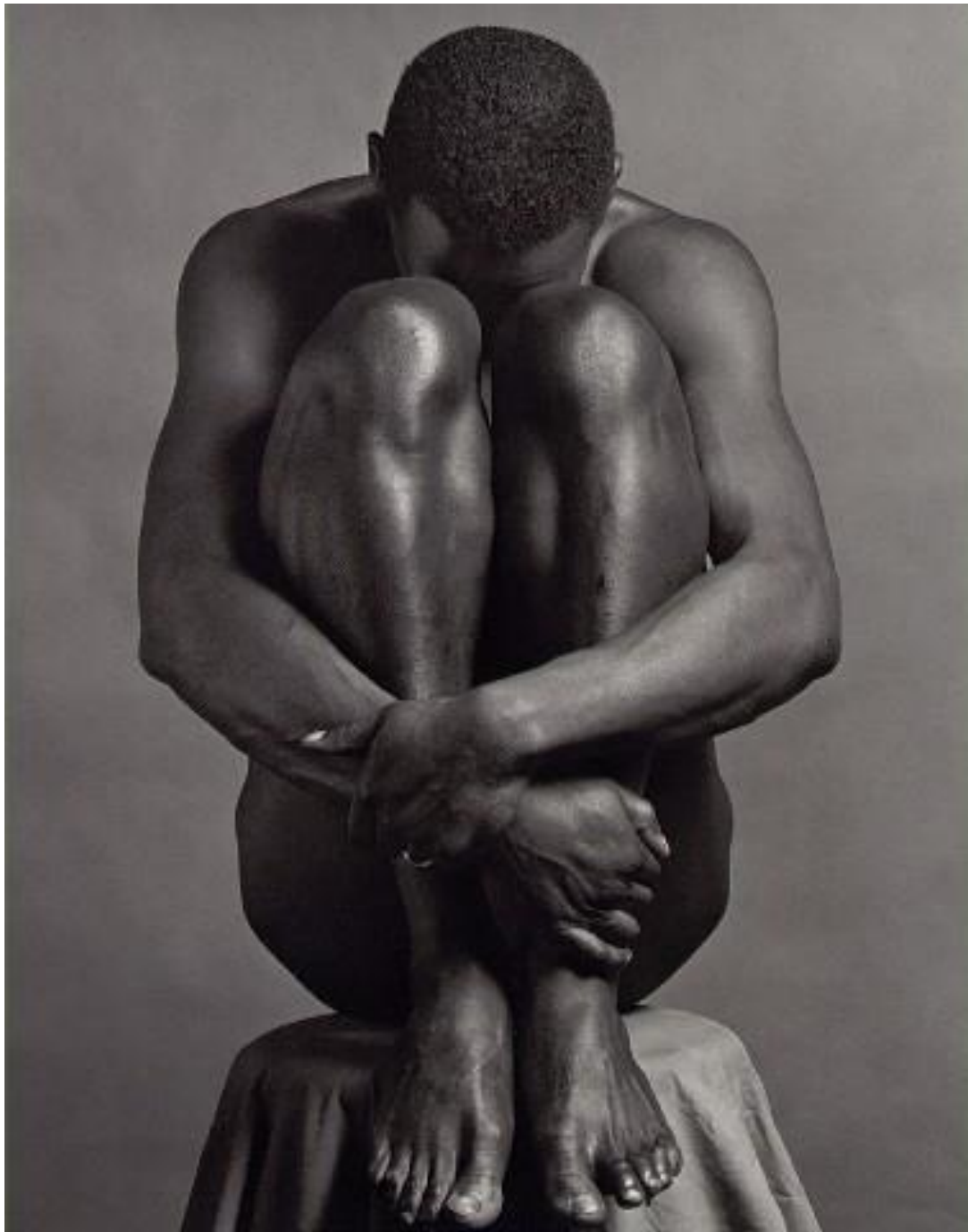
Intrinsic Value and “Culture Wars”

The value of art is not all about money. The intrinsic value of art is often the subject of intense debate.

The “Culture Wars”, implying a conflict of traditional and progressive values, challenged the artistic expression of artist Robert Mapplethorpe and questioned the idea of value in art.

Robert Mapplethorpe

- Photographer, known for photographs of male nudes, and sometimes depictions of homoerotic acts
- In the summer of 1989, his work was scheduled to be exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC. He had died a few months earlier due to an AIDS-related condition.
- The work raised the ire of Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who threatened to terminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, and independent Federal agency that had partially paid for the exhibition.
- The Corcoran Gallery canceled the show, not wanting to risk losing its continued funding.



Robert Mapplethorpe,
Ajitto, 1981

Gelatin silver print

- The show was moved to a smaller Washington gallery, Project for the Ars, where nearly 50,000 people visited it in 25 days.
- The exhibition traveled without incident to Connecticut and California.
- When it later opened at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center, police seized many of the photographs as "criminally obscene" and arrested the director of the Center.
- The Arts Center, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, and his estate together countered by filing a suit to determine whether the photographs were obscene under Ohio law.
- "We want a decision on whether the work as a whole has serious artistic value", they stated.

- The judge in the trial ruled that the jury should not consider Mapplethorpe's work "as a whole"; rather, he declared that each had a separate identity.
- The jury acquitted the Center and its director. They found that each image possessed serious artistic value.
- A good deal of the testimony focused on the formal qualities of the work.
- Witness Robert Sobieszek, senior curator, stated that Mapplethorpe "wanted to document what was beautiful and what was torturous- in his personal experience. If something is truly obscene or pornographic, then it's not art." He likened Mapplethorpe addressing the terms of his own life to Van Gogh painting himself with his ear cut off.

- The jury found that, considered in the context of art as a whole, in the context of art's concern with form, and in the context of the history of art and its tradition of confronting those parts of our lives that give us pain as well as pleasure, Mapplethorpe's work possessed "serious artistic value".
- Value is a relative term. What some people value, others do not and cannot.



Robert Mapplethorpe
Ken and Tyler, 1985
Platinum print.

Mapplethorpe often blurred the distinction between the “male” and the “female” in his works. In *Ken and Tyler*, the male body assumes the more traditionally female role of the nude in art.

Art and the Idea of Beauty

For many people, the main purpose of art is to satisfy our **aesthetic** sense: our desire to see and experience the beautiful.

What is considered beautiful differs from culture to culture and from time to time (consider the human body).

From a certain point of view, the experience of dynamic tension is pleasing. Though a work of art may not itself be beautiful, if it triggers a higher level of thought and awareness in the viewer, and the viewer experiences this higher order of thought- it is a form of beauty in its own right.

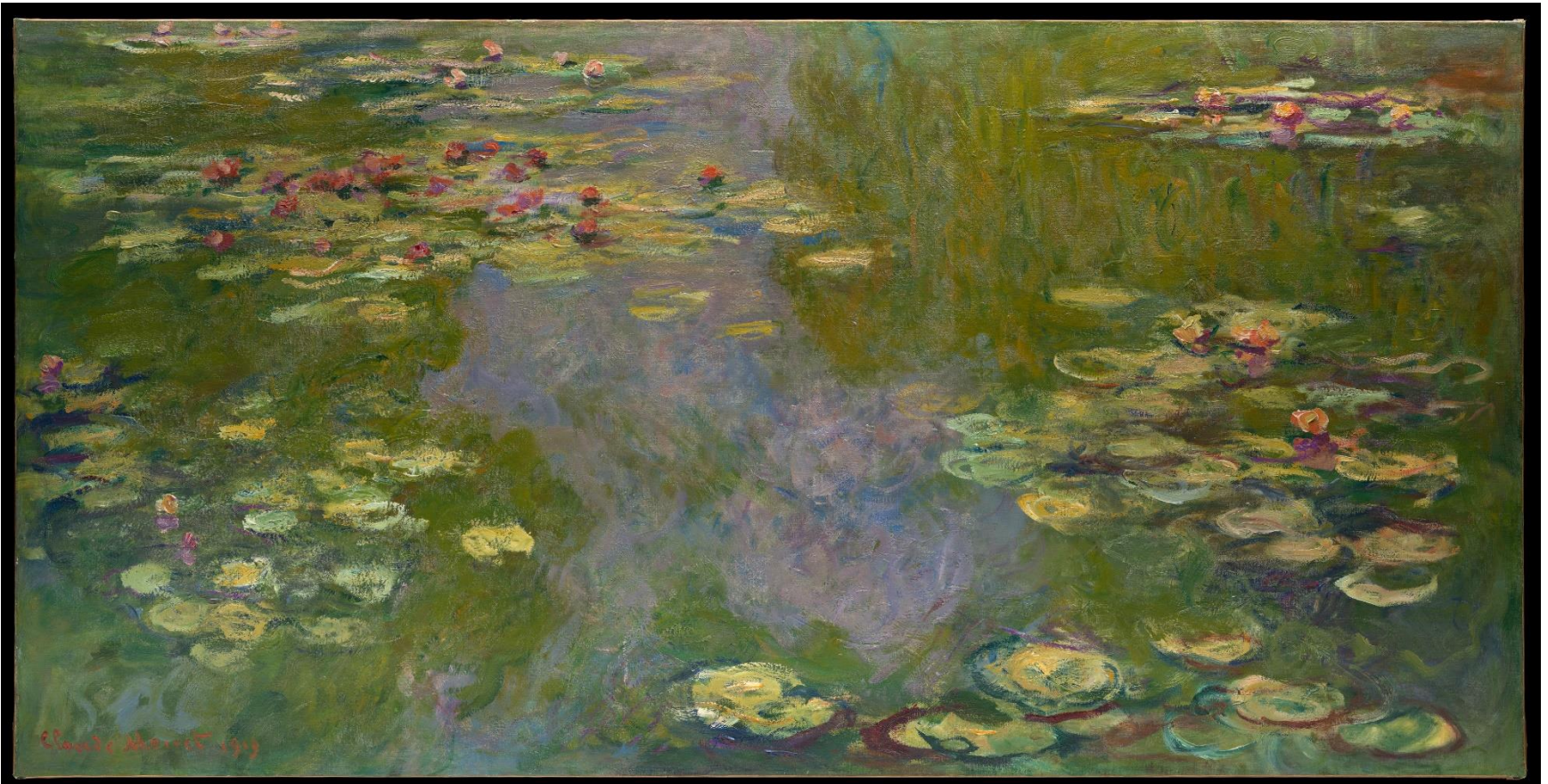
Aesthetics: a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste and with the creation and appreciation of beauty.

The Avant-Garde and Public Opinion

- The artist's relation to the public depends on the public's understanding of what the artist is trying to say.
- The public tends to receive innovative artwork with reservation because it usually has little context (historically or otherwise) with which to view it.
- It's not easy to appreciate, or value, what is not understood.

Avant-garde: those who are working in advance of their time.

Artwork that is revered today was once controversial. Below is Claude Monet's *Waterlilies* painting. While today it is one of the most loved and famous paintings, and its image is available printed on everything from umbrellas to tote bags, it was not well received by the public at its debut- people thought that the use of color and brush application was garish. His avant-garde approach and his extraordinary use of point and color began the trail for subsequent art movements.





Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912; oil on canvas.

This painting debuted with a great controversy in 1912. It was ridiculed in the press, and the butt of many jokes. It is telling, however, that the jest surrounding this painting focused on the inability to see the nude. The public did not immediately understand it, so it was perceived as joke (they could not take it seriously).



Maya Lin, *Vietnam Memorial*, 1982

This memorial was not well received by the public when it debuted- it is low to the ground, compared to the Washington Monument.



The Washington Monument

Art, Politics, and Public Space

The goal of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was to teach the public how to see and appreciate what it called “advanced art” when it was first funded by Congress in 1967.

Through its Art in Public Places Program, it wanted to enhance the social life of the nation, and make the places we live more beautiful or at least more interesting.

Artist Richard Serra’s controversial Tilted Arc tested this hypothesis like none other.



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*,
1981

Cor-Ten steel
12 ft. x 120 ft. x 2 ½ in

Tilted Arc controversy

- The sculpture was installed in 1981 in Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan, and at first only caused minor negative reaction.
- In 1985, the newly appointed Regional Administrator began an active campaign to have it removed. Nearly everyone believed that those working in the Federal Plaza complex despised the work.
- In fact, of 12,000 employees, only 3,791 signed the petition to have it removed, but nearly as many- 3,763- signed a petition to save it.

- Public perception was that the piece was “a scar on the plaza”.
- The sculpture was dismantled in 1989 during the night, despite protests from Serra, and it has subsequently been destroyed.
- Serra intended his work to be confrontational, and it was political. He felt that Americans were divided from their government, and that the arc divided the plaza in the same way. Its tilt was ominous- it seemed ready to topple over at any instant.
- This questioned political power probably more dramatically than he ever intended.
- The value of the work was not for its beauty, but its insight, for what it revealed about the place it was in.



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, detail view

Earlier Controversy: Michelangelo's *David* (1501-04)

- Today, *David* is one of the world's most famous sculptures, considered a masterpiece of Renaissance art.
- It was carved from a giant, 16 ft high block of marble quarried 40 years prior, that was riddled with cracks, and was refused by other sculptors
- It was originally commissioned as a public piece designed for a plaza where public political meetings took place.
- It was meant to represent David's triumph over Goliath, and symbolize republican Florence- the city's freedom from foreign and papal domination, as well as the rule of the Medici family, who was seen as tyrannical.



Supporters of the Medici family hurled stones at the sculpture, and guards were hired to watch over it.

Other citizens objected to its nudity, and a skirt of copper leaves had been prepared to spare offense (today the skirt is long gone).

The Medici family returned to power in 1512, and the sculpture was replaced by a copy in 1873, moved for protection from the natural elements.

Today we value *David* not for its politics but for its beauty and accomplishment.

Aesthetics remain an important issue, especially in the public area.