

2004

## Picturing home: Domestic painting and the ideologies of art

Mark E. Sprinkle

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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PICTURING HOME:  
Domestic Painting and the Ideologies of Art

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Program in American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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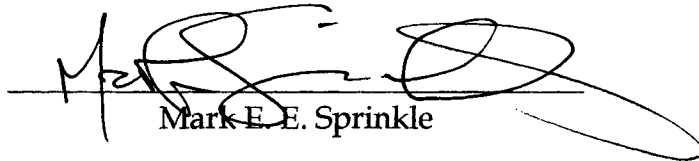
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Mark E. E. Sprinkle


2004

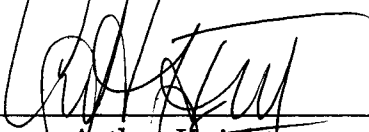
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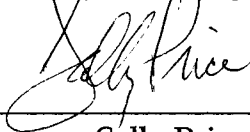
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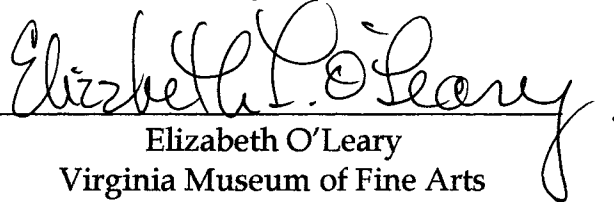
  
Mark E. E. Sprinkle

Approved by the Committee, August 2004

  
Alan Wallach, Chair

  
Arthur Knight

  
Sally Price

  
Elizabeth O'Leary  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

## DEDICATION

This dissertation would not be but for the many members of my family who have alternately held carrot or stick before me during the long process of bringing the work to completion. My parents and parents-in-law have encouraged, cajoled, sometimes bribed, and only occasionally browbeat me towards this end; my sister has offered her editorial pen as well as her support, and my brother and sister-in-law have faithfully avoided any mention of the subject during recreational time spent together. Despite my recurrent irritability with them, my boys have offered a constant but patient chorus of "Are you finished with your dissertation yet?" always looking forward to the time when I will devote my full attention to playing with them. But my deepest gratitude and admiration is reserved for my wife, who has endured alternate stretches of my diligent work and (longer) stretches of procrastination with equal measures of patience and love. Beyond her roles as mother and wife, she is my dearest friend, companion and intellectual partner; my thinking and writing have been most clear when they have had the benefit of her insightful criticism. Therefore, it is with great joy and relief that I am able to dedicate this dissertation to Beth: here's to personal growth.

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## PREFACE

To say that *Picturing Home* is a work of “interdisciplinary scholarship” is also a way of saying that it is easier to define what is *not* than to name exactly what it *is*. It is neither an empirical, sociological study nor a true ethnography, for instance. It is not a work of anthropology or fully a cultural geography. And neither is it conventional art history, nor simply an extended exercise in (meta)criticism. Though aspects and techniques of each of those approaches found their ways into the research for and writing of the text, readers from any of those disciplines may find such a synthesis challenging.

Yet this state of affairs is to be expected when one considers the changing and conflicting goals that have carried the project forward over the course of nearly a decade. What began as a way to “partially fulfill the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy” became much more of a vehicle to help me, its author, make sense of and navigate the complex ideological structures that frame the identity of “the artist” in contemporary America – to chart the possibilities and constraints for pursuing that career identity myself, as a painter more than as an academic writer. Having earned majors in both American Studies and Painting in my undergraduate studies, but also having worked doing wall finishes and cabinetmaking after college, my pursuit of a Ph.D. in American studies was a decision to seek a life in the arts that was both intellectually challenging and oriented towards the relative (imagined) safety of association with a university or museum. This was to be in contrast to the much-touted difficulty of “making it” as an independent artist. But the reading and thinking I did in the course of my studies at William and Mary and while working at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts allowed me to question conventional narratives of artistic professionalism and the “proper” context for considering paintings in new ways, such that I was prepared to engage – rather than just describe – the altogether different model of relationship between artists and their culture that is embodied in the people and places of Atlanta’s domestic painting market.

Because my personal engagement with the ideas and social structures that are the object of my study was also reflected in the ways I went about studying the people, places, and objects that are at the heart of the fieldwork portion of this dissertation, a description of my research methodology seems appropriate here, at the outset. Initial fieldwork for the study began in August and September of 1995 with a series of fifty-five taped interviews in Atlanta with two artist’s agents (Mrs. Anne Irwin and the sister-in-law team of Judy Jones and Marge Fowler), fifteen of the artists who were associated with them, and many of the individuals who had bought their paintings. The set of buyers included

seven interviews with design professionals (five of whom worked from their homes), two with owners of small shops specializing in home furnishings and accessories who included artworks in their inventories, and twenty-eight with homeowners who had purchased art directly. Four more in-home interviews exist in note form only. The interviewees were predominantly white women (1 male artist was included and two husbands joined with their wives in the discussion of art in their home), ranged in age from their late thirties to late fifties, and lived in northwest Atlanta and its suburbs.

My entree into the market was an invitation from my mother-in-law, Gladys Mitchell, to go with her to an in-home show of paintings staged by a friend, Mrs. Irwin, and the core of my sample was the list of artists and buyers provided by Mrs. Irwin. From that beginning I followed interpersonal links and suggestions of the interviewees to find other people to talk to and places to see. The interviews typically lasted from an hour to an hour-and-a half, though several (especially with artists) were over two hours long. Though many of the interviews in each group took on more of the character of conversations than interviews, all elicited the personal histories of the subjects relating to making and/or buying art (formal training, friends or relatives in the arts, etc.), sought to establish the relationships between the subject and other participants in the market, and asked about attitudes towards art in general, both within and outside of the local market context. Notable is the fact that my interviews of homeowner/buyers usually began with a tour of the house and its art, and in nearly every case my request to see the artworks that were meaningful to the resident resulted in a full tour of the home, including such private spaces as bedrooms and bathrooms. The last stage of the fieldwork (conducted in July 2003) entailed second interviews with five of the original participants along with three women who were not part of the first set, all of whom agreed to discuss their artworks in detail and allow me to take digital photographs of their homes.

Despite this openness with their homes and lives, the women (and a few men) with whom I spoke were not unconcerned about their privacy. I stressed, therefore, that the recordings I made were strictly to free me to pay attention to the discussion rather than be distracted by having to scribble notes, and that I would protect the anonymity of my subjects. I have done so by using pseudonyms and interview numbers for the citation of participants with the exception of the already "public figures" of the art agents and shop owners. I treated the artists interviewed in a hybrid manner, attaching real names to the paintings illustrated but not to their statements unless the speaker specifically authorized me to cite them. Throughout the interview process, I tried to make clear that I was not primarily collecting quotes, attempting to tell the interviewees' stories, or even help them to tell their own, but instead trying to understand the relationship between artworks and the physical frame of the

private home – even though the home is the main symbolic space in which such storytelling happens. I also made a careful study of artworks produced and exchanged in the market (through first-hand examination and through reproductions used in marketing materials like post-cards, invitations and magazine ads) and of its various commercial spaces other than private homes. Coupled with the concern for privacy, this primary focus on the patterns of arrangement and use of space and objects rather than narrative helps explain why quotations from my informants do not play a greater role in the text than they do.

If that emphasis seems somewhat impersonal, however, my engagement with the connection between art and the home took on a much more personal quality after the initial field research was completed, when I was trying to begin to make sense of what I had seen and heard. Even in the letters I sent to potential interviewees I identified myself as a painter as well as researcher, a fact which always seemed to invite a lively discussion of personal tastes and opinions about art and lead my informants to be as interested in finding out about me as I was about them. But seeing a marketing network for artworks that was so interpersonally vibrant and seemingly independent of the mainstream rules for “professional artist” career tracks, I decided to make my claim of being an artist a practical rather than merely rhetorical one.

For the next several years I returned to painting full-time, making hand-built frames with my wife, and selling our work by commission and through three home-shows: two in Atlanta and one in Northern Virginia. I was asked to stage an individual show at Georgetown University in the Spring of 2001, and also renewed my interest and business in doing decorative wall finishes during this time. Though I scrupulously avoided connecting my own art practice with that of the people and places I had been studying in the Atlanta market, this different kind of access to various classes of picture-buyers (and often, their houses) was invaluable in helping me refine my understanding of how art is experienced in many middle and upper-middle class American homes. Some of the information obtained in this way, in fact, was extraordinarily pertinent and even worth illustrating, concerns about impartiality and critical distance aside: as a gift for his wife, one of my wife's cousins commissioned me to paint and frame the small dog portrait shown as Figure 12, giving me a splendid opportunity to visit their house later and talk to the recipient about why she placed it where she did. In truth, the kind of ethnographic information I gleaned over several years by talking to people as a painter, whether they had any interest in my own work or not, was at least as critical to understanding the meaning of art as was that obtained by formal interviews and the researcher-informant relationships.



Finally, working as a painter made clear to me that much of the ideology I had internalized during my education as an artist and art historian was in sometimes subtle, and other times explicit conflict with the values I encountered and felt making art in this domestically oriented context, and even living with art in my own private house. These conflicts were and are not easily resolvable either personally or societally, but the attempt to do so was the driving force behind (again) putting my painting aside in 2002 and returning to the task of finishing this dissertation and degree. The role of ideology in the construction of personal narratives and images – especially for cultural producers like myself and many of my readers – brings me back, then, to the prominent place that texts and ideology play in a finished work that might otherwise have tipped the scales towards ethnography, sociology, even material culture studies. Certainly, the study that follows is rooted in (if not synonymous with) my own attempt to make sense of ideological baggage about art, though it has been told in large part through the people and spaces of northwest Atlanta.

My first debt, therefore, is to the many women in Atlanta – artists, agents, designers, homeowners, store owners – who so graciously agreed to talk to me about their work, or to show me around their houses while telling the stories of the artworks and people that live there. Their openness was the *sine qua non* of my investigation of art in the intimate space of the contemporary home. I must also thank my parents-in-law, Billy and Gladys, for providing me food and lodging, transportation, and a quiet retreat in which to think and write, along with their encouragement and diverting company, when necessary.

At William and Mary, my greatest appreciation goes to my Advisor, Professor Alan Wallach, for his patient support and encouragement during the long and sporadic course of my work on this dissertation. I am also indebted to the members of the Executive Committee of the Program in American Studies for their willingness to extend to me time well beyond the usual limits and often beyond what my apparent progress merited. And finally, I wish to thank Professors Knight and Price and Dr. O'Leary for their willingness to read and critique the manuscript under the pressure of my impending deadlines, notwithstanding even my long absence from or very recent appearance in their fields of view. They have been especially helpful in holding me to the high standard of reflexivity I set for other writers in this field.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation describes *domestic painting* in Atlanta, Georgia between 1995 and 2004 as defined by its intentional connection of the ideologies and spaces of art with those of bourgeois domesticity. The first half of the work seeks to contextualize the market's various objects and texts within public and academic discourses on culture that commonly posit antithesis between the practices of bourgeois women (especially *decoration*) and "high" or avant-garde art, as suggested by the sentiment, "GOOD ART WON'T MATCH YOUR SOFA." Thus, Chapter 1 addresses the promises and pitfalls of sociological approaches to understanding art in general, Chapter 2 addresses two recent field studies of local markets as examples of how methodological decisions can mask ideological bias, and Chapter 3 discusses the historical context behind the divorce of art and the home as part of the gendering of aesthetic creativity as a predominantly masculine pursuit, each chapter examining the place of the literature itself in the creation of the categories of art. The second part of the dissertation provides an account of the way paintings produced in the market encode its social and spatial relations as a way of visualizing the private home and its interpersonal contents. In Chapter 4, the author proposes *intuitive vision* to name distinctive visual habits and bodily practices of bourgeois domesticity in contemporary Atlanta, especially the role of artworks in the phenomenological space of the home. Chapter 5 focuses on *integration* as domestic painting's central quality and goal, linking the concrete physical and stylistic features of specific artworks to their domestic settings, connecting the market's various agents in a coherent social milieu is not restricted to their art-related roles, and becoming the very purpose of aesthetic experience in these contexts. Chapters 6 and 7 chart the concrete terrain of 'home-like' spaces devoted to the production and distribution of paintings in the market, while developing the distinction between phenomenological and sight-based representations of domesticity. Finally, the Conclusion returns to the supposed antithesis between avant-garde aesthetics and the various practices known collectively as decoration as a way to address the question, "What is bourgeois art?"

PICTURING HOME:  
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## Introduction

The nominal criterion for high art is some meaningful contribution that advances our cultural vision. The other end of the continuum of art objects is purely decorative work . . . The important distinction is between art that makes a personally valid statement and that which is pure decoration or has practical utility.

--Stuart Plattner, *High Art Down Home*, p. 6.

In our human living, the petty kingdoms ruled quite independently by architect and decorator and sociologist have no independence: it is not the painted plaster alone that sings to us, but whether something hangs upon it.

--Denis Wood and Robert J. Beck, *Home Rules*, p. 4.

From my vantage point in the entry hall, I had a view of at least twenty paintings ranging in size and medium from an eight- by ten-inch watercolor to a thirty- by forty-inch oil. Some were close at hand, while others I could see through doorways into adjacent rooms, arrayed not just on the walls, but sitting on the stairs leading to the second floor, propped upon chairs, spread out on the dining room table and even resting on the cushions of the sofa. On a Friday morning in April 1995, I had come with my wife and my mother-in-law to the Atlanta home of artists' agent Anne Irwin for her annual Spring exhibition and sale of paintings. As was the case for the handful of people already walking casually about inside and the dozens of others who would come during the next

two days, our welcome included an offer of coffee or tea, a quick tour of the layout of the rooms in which artworks were being displayed, and an invitation not only to look at the paintings, but to examine them closely, in some cases hold them, and in every case be equally comfortable with the works of art as with the house in which they were displayed. In short, Mrs. Irwin's every effort – which both framed and enabled her goal of selling paintings for the artists she represented – was to make her guests feel fully at home with art.

But what does it mean to be “at home with art”? Is it a matter of the place, or of the kind of work, or of the individual who perceives the two together? Is such a state emotional or rational? Is wedding domestic comfort to art a practice that all would embrace, or is it, by contrast, something to be shunned? The phrase suggests these and a dozen other questions having to do with our understanding of what it means to be “at home” in any locale (but particularly in a private dwelling) and of the category of cultural works we call “art,” but it directs our particular attention to questions of how, when and why the spheres of art and domestic space overlap. This dissertation attempts to answer those questions by examining a contemporary art market that is not just oriented towards but defined by the juncture of art and home.



## *Domestic Painting*

In essence, this study is a description and analysis of a discrete segment of the art market in Atlanta, Georgia, using the relationships among Anne Irwin, the artists she represents and has represented, and the public for which they work as a starting place from which to explore the social and physical context of paintings in the home. Though also informed by others' work in the sociology of art, my project is undergirded by an art-historical attention to the paintings themselves and by a material culture analysis of the physical spaces and environments where the art is made, exchanged and consumed. Beginning with that first visit with Mrs. Irwin and continuing for the next eight years, I set about a series of dozens of interviews and countless explorations of what I have come to call Atlanta's "domestic painting" market—the network of artists, agents, buyers, and spaces for trading and valuing artwork that is primarily destined for display in private, professional-class homes. In their varied and often-overlapping roles, upper middle-class women are the predominant actors in all three phases of this market (production, distribution, consumption), and their private houses are the economic and symbolic foundations upon which it is built. On one hand, "home" seems a straightforward place to begin, if only because it is a familiar category to most of us. But on the other hand, it is important to understand the layered nature of the private home, itself. Not merely where many of the daily routines of living occur, it is also the primary site of

consumption in contemporary commodity culture and a kind of social clothing whose very spatial fabric reflects and contributes to the personal and family identities of its inhabitants. Therefore, when considering home as a setting for art, I have sought to assess the importance of artworks – including particular styles and subjects of artworks – within the entirety of the domestic aesthetic system and locate the aesthetics of the quintessentially “private” upper middle-class home within both the local and supra-local “public” spheres of markets, institutions and publications.

Of course the artworks themselves are the currency in which this entire aesthetic system trades; thus, a close reading of paintings as significant objects in carefully crafted environments is the complement to the study’s analysis of the social context in which they have value. Beyond a certain degree of uniformity in the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles of the works I’ll discuss, a unifying quality found among the still-lives, interior scenes, and garden imagery prevalent in domestic painting is the referential reflexivity they have with their surroundings. But formal analysis alone misses much; the meanings of the artworks are contained neither in their creation, nor exchange, nor even the placement in their final domestic setting alone, but in the ongoing process through which they are repeatedly encountered in the home, by its occupants and others. And while these “object transactions” are usually private and highly individualized, they are nevertheless patterned in the public spaces of the

market, which are themselves structured according to shared assumptions about what environments facilitate such material and interpersonal relationships. This project, therefore, nests an analysis of recurring subjects and readings of specific paintings in private homes within an overview of pseudo-domestic retail spaces and commercially-sponsored “idea [read: *ideal*] houses,” suggesting the indeterminacy of the border between public and private that obtains in each setting, and indicating the importance of artworks as tools for negotiating those boundaries.

Yet important as the home setting is as a venue in which art helps to encode and decode identities, I use “domestic painting” to refer to this genre not only because most of the works will be placed in private dwellings, but because many are created in home studios and most are sold in outlets that are a hybrid of commercial and domestic spaces: a home temporarily turned into a retail gallery, retail spaces occupying converted houses or outfitted to resemble fully-furnished homes, shops devoted to helping women make sure their homes are comfortable and expressive. The importance of quasi-domestic spaces as conduits for artworks to move from one home space to another is also a defining feature of this market, and one which led me to focus on the linkages among physical spaces as much as the spaces themselves. It was by following a trail of connections from Mrs. Irwin’s home to the homes of women who had bought paintings from her; and from her second, more traditional retail space to the

related shops and galleries nearby; and from the market's center in Atlanta to the other cities and settings in the region that I sought to map the fullness of its economic and symbolic landscape. As the metropolitan center of its region, for instance, Atlanta is connected to various vacation and "country retreat" locales that form several ever-widening perimeters of leisure around it, including numerous local lakes, dozens of mountain and mountain-lake communities in both northwestern Georgia and Western North Carolina, and the cities and island resorts along the Atlantic coast: Charleston, Savannah, Hilton Head, etc. The echoes between home and such temporary or second homes are also a principal subject of domestic painting, and personal and business relationships between people in Atlanta and these more or less remote sites are at once a feature of that preexisting pattern of travel and a response to it. There are galleries and homes in places like Sea Island, Georgia and Highlands, North Carolina that could justly be considered part of the Atlanta market, though I have limited my focus to the principal sites in the city itself, even to its northern quadrant. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence and my own informal research in other cities and regions suggest that much of what I will describe as the dynamic of a "home market" for art has its corollary in cities across the Southeast and the country as a whole; thus the Atlanta market is linked to other regional and national locales through both specific relationships between individuals in Atlanta and those other cities and through a generalized structural homology.

Although distinct and coherent, then, this market is neither small nor unambiguously delimited by the list of local or regional sites in which it operates, especially when one considers the dynamics of how those sites are linked. In fact, the boundaries of this art-world are defined not by the physical or economic geography of Atlanta or even its region, but by the practices and attitudes about art and the home that govern interactions among its agents – the material environment and physical boundaries are both the contexts for and products of the market's social relations. The web of social and professional relationships that extends specifically from Mrs. Irwin and provides a practical framework for my field research constitutes a case study of this wider market type, then, and represents only one of the many such webs that could be studied even in Atlanta. (Following the links from Mrs. Irwin, for example, led to two other women working as artists' agents from their homes, themselves a nexus for another such network of relationships and spaces.) For whether radiating from Mrs. Irwin or another, these patterns of interpersonal transactions constitute the genre of domestic painting as much as do its physical locales and works.

Of several important social aspects of the market that emerged from my interviews with artists, agents, and buyers, the first is that pre-existing relationships among women often facilitated the aesthetic and economic transactions that followed. Many professional and market ties between artists, agents, and buyers began with affiliations through their churches, children's

schools, or husbands' employment. The initial "home-shows" were successful in part because the friends and neighbors who were the artists' first buyers recognized that format as a combination of shopping and socializing, through which they might support their peers. Second, the art-world participants share a common assessment of the importance of the domestic space and the need to spend time, effort and money to outfit homes, whether for themselves or professionally for others. It is significant that despite the high honor afforded *art* as a category in this local culture, it is rarely treated as a discrete cultural field unto itself, but rather as one contiguous with the larger market for home furnishings and design services; furthermore, this aesthetic economy is integrated fairly seamlessly into the wider social world of the women involved. Third, while the boundaries between the private home and public marketplace are permeable, and there is no structural barrier between the various and overlapping roles of wife, mother, homemaker, decorator, artist, and agent, the duties and the credentials appropriate to each are negotiated and sometimes contested, and the apparent commonalities of these actors do not negate their widely divergent experiences, ambitions, practices and interests. So while I have not attempted to give detailed life histories or emphasize more than a few specific personalities, it is important to remember that the market exists as a ground for common exchange, but not because the women who meet there are themselves interchangeable. It has therefore been my task to understand how

these individual women weave ideologies of gender, home and art into a cooperative, coherent symbolic economy.

During the decade of the 1980s and through much of the 1990s, Atlanta shared in the regional Sun-Belt boom, and its real estate, building, and related design businesses flourished. But while structural factors created a general field of opportunity, the success of this art world in becoming self-supporting within the wider economies of design/decoration and fine arts rests on the ability and willingness of the participants to deploy ideological rhetoric in the marketplace as well as their own creative skills and hard work; that is, they have supported their material efforts by making both implicit and explicit truth claims about the importance of the connection of art and the home. The world of domestic paintings is organized around an *aesthetic* in the philosophical sense, as well as in the sense of a unifying visual code or, more precisely, *a way of visualizing the home and its contents*. This is important particularly because published case studies of art-worlds termed “marginal” because of their dominance by women, geographic distance from recognized art centers, or both, have consistently focused on their participants’ inability to break into the male-dominated or avant-garde system of art interpretation, valuation and sales with any long term success, and these studies have often attributed failure to women’s inability to

marshal their ideological forces effectively enough to convince those already “in” that they should be included, too.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at the challenges faced in transferring to the public market this genre’s particular way of seeing art as part of domesticity highlights the role of ideological contest in the development of art-worlds and moves this discussion towards the second major goal of the dissertation, even as it builds on the first, descriptive project. One of the main reasons for undertaking a thorough description of local phenomena in the first place is to illuminate the broader cultural setting; the second objective is to contextualize this market, its practices and its ideological formations within the wider world of American arts and intellectual activities, with an ultimate end of demonstrating some of the ways in which power relations and hierarchies in the field of cultural production are established and maintained. Specifically, the overarching goal of my dissertation is to discuss the ideologies of art that are being negotiated by the people in and outside of this market as an indicator of how the same issues are being worked

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Prieto chronicles women’s attempts to meet the constantly shifting bar of artistic professionalism from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1930s, but even her rather optimistic assessment of the strides made by feminist artists and writers since the 1960s “to carve out a place for themselves as professionals” is accompanied by the admission that “women artists did not control the terms on which they were judged.” [Laura R Prieto, *At Home in the Studio The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001): p. 210]. Kauffman describes how the members of contemporary associations of women artists in New York and Philadelphia continue to be caught between competing ideologies of femininity and artistic professionalism [Bette J. Kauffman, “‘Woman Artist’: Between Myth and Stereotype,” in Gross, Larry, ed. *On the Margins of Art Worlds*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995): pp. 95-120.], as did Michal M. McCall in her “The Sociology of Female Artists: A Study of Female Painters, Sculptors, and Printmakers in St. Louis.” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1975).



out between groups in contemporary American culture at large, especially the question, “What counts as ‘real’ Art?” and its corollaries about who counts as a “real” artist, and who gets to decide.

### *Putting Art in its Place*

Though this dissertation turns on a discussion of art in relation to the specific environs of private homes with an eye to answering the question, “how does art relate to the domestic context?” its examination of ideological relations in the field of culture is also pivotal and addresses the possibility of answering the more contested “how *ought* art relate to the domestic context – if at all – and why?” In order to draw a clear contrast between the criteria of valuation applied to art in or associated with the home and those applied to art in other settings, it is useful to look more generally at how the surroundings in which we find artworks contribute to our perceptions of the meaning and value of the works themselves, and conversely, how artworks contribute to our sense and experience of specific places. I’ve already described the specific places that are the focus of this dissertation, but before returning to them, I’ll describe a few other places fairly obviously linked to the valuation of art and the experience of people in them.

At least since the days of the Salon in eighteenth-century Paris, the display of art in a large-scale public setting has suggested that the works thus displayed

are in some way exemplary of what art should be.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not the public agrees that the individual works selected by the exhibit organizers meet the criteria of being “important,” or even “good,” by attending and viewing art in such a setting, it implicitly recognizes and bolsters the public exhibition as a primary venue for the establishment and negotiation of artistic value. Though much has changed in terms of both publics and institutions in the intervening two centuries, large museum exhibitions for living artists – staged amidst their own grand architecture and now accompanied by highly-produced written interpretations of the work exhibited – are descendants of the Salon and serve a similar legitimizing and valorizing function for the art and artists exhibited.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps an even more archetypical art-viewing experience of our age, the “block-buster” exhibition of masterpiece paintings provides a clear example of the resonance that exists between art, setting and viewer. Often, the viewer’s experience at such a show consists largely of trying to catch glimpses of famous works, already known in reproduction, through the crowd of other museum-goers;<sup>4</sup> in the rare best instance, the viewer may be treated to a moment alone

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<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) for an examination of the establishment of the Salon as not just the principal venue for public display of art, but also as instrumental to the creation of the idea of an expanded “public” for artworks in the first place.

<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): p110, discussed extensively in Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> The role of reproductions in the establishment and negotiation of the value of artworks is a rich topic in and of itself, and has received its share of critical attention, beginning with Walter Benjamin’s seminal “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” (1935). The ease with which colorful reproductions of famous artworks can be produced and distributed today

with a favorite painting, and for the first time see it in un-reproduced color and all three dimensions, dramatically lit, and suspended like a holy relic against a softly-toned wall. In this last respect, the contemporary museum exhibition technique of hanging works in a single, generously-spaced row is a far cry from the practice of the Salon, where paintings would be hung cheek by jowl, covering the walls nearly to the ceiling.<sup>5</sup> But though the works' being exhibited in an institutional setting still implicitly asserts their place in the world of high culture, and the grand architecture of most major museums all but commands reverence in the presence of art, the pilgrimage-like social dynamic of the large exhibition makes such an assertion even more palpable for museum-goers.<sup>6</sup> While even peering through a crowd – as in the first viewing scenario above – can lend the reassurance of shared values and valuation, the private communion experience

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notwithstanding, the aura of the unique “original” works contributes to the lure of museum exhibitions, while the exhibitions themselves encourage the proliferation of reproductions. In their own way – as the cousins of the catalogue raisonné that has long been a tool to establish (even posthumously) the reputation of the artist studied – contemporary exhibition catalogues in general and especially expensive glossy examples published to accompany blockbuster shows help establish the place of paintings included in them among other works “important” enough to be reproduced. But catalogues are less often tools for art-historical inquiry than they are souvenirs of the experience of the exhibition, and a way for viewers to literally take the art home with them.

<sup>5</sup> The history of display practices generally and especially the use of color as a coordinating background for artworks in exhibition settings has been the subject of recent scholarship and even the recreation at the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. of two exhibitions staged by Whistler in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. See Kenneth Myers, *Mr. Whistler's gallery: pictures at an 1884 exhibition* (Washington: Freer Gallery, 2003), and David Park Curry, *James McNeill Whistler: Uneasy Pieces* (New York: Quantuck Lane Press, forthcoming). I will return to the subject of artists' control over the domestic interior below.

<sup>6</sup> Public excitement about such exhibitions – fanned by ubiquitous advertising in print (and even on the sides of buses), and confirmed and regulated by timed admissions and advance ticketing – make them the art world equivalent of “must see TV.”

of the second is even more effective in contributing to the aura of cultural importance that surrounds the works displayed.<sup>7</sup>

Let me stress here that the surroundings in which art is viewed include not just the physical space, but the social space, too. The aura that surrounds the paintings in a blockbuster show and is reinforced by the dynamics of the exhibit extends beyond the works themselves; it can cast a reciprocal glow on both the museum and the participants in this art pilgrimage. Part of viewers' perception of importance of the artwork comes from finding themselves in reassuringly good cultural company while viewing, a fact which points to the contingency of cultural experiences even in dedicated physical spaces like the museum on the social dynamics at play in those spaces. And if the blockbuster exhibition is an obvious example of the way that the meaning and value of art is rooted in the richness of its cultural, spatial context, it is not the only one; nor is its example of objects, audience, architectural space and institutional structure working in concert for the valorization of artistic expression the only way these elements interact: in other circumstances, the relationship between art, audience and surroundings can be marked by *disjuncture* of expectations and goals, usually when the audience is given something unlooked for to look at.

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<sup>7</sup> On the architectural language and ideological goals of large museums, see Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum." *Art History* 3:4 (December 1980): 448-475.

The history of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone gives ample evidence that perceptions of the meaning and merit of a work of art have much to do with the context in which we experience it, a fact which is perhaps even more readily seen outside the museums and commercial galleries that are the places most conventionally associated with viewing art. On one hand, even an ordinary (or banal) object can be transformed into art by the fiat of placing it in a space reserved for “creative expression” (for example, when Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal signed and titled *Fountain* in 1917); and on the other hand, both art and ordinary spaces can be de-routinized when artists place artworks where they are not expected (New York’s Armory Show of 1913, for instance, in which art that was ‘modern’ and challenged convention was displayed in an equally untraditional venue). Sometimes the very purpose of a work is to *do* work to the space, transforming it and our experience of being in it (e.g., site-specific sculpture like Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), installed and later removed from the Federal Plaza in New York City). All these venues – even ones in which the art is contested – nevertheless attest to the breadth of spaces that can be considered appropriate for art. I have already mentioned site-specific sculpture, but environmental works were meant to challenge the expected place of artworks and their subjection both to the market economy and the hierarchies of museum exhibition, just as performance art and conceptual works were meant in part to challenge the ability of collectors to render artworks into commodities.

To put it another way, the key problem to be solved by “advancing” art in the past century could be seen to be the challenge of making art into something one can’t take home, for home remains the one place that art may not really belong.<sup>8</sup>

In each of the cases and locations named above, what a viewer brings of his or her knowledge, expectations, even vocabulary about art and the cultural site itself can have profound effects on how both are perceived. While a purposeful juxtaposition of an artwork with a specific environment may call attention to heretofore-unnoticed features of familiar places and art-forms both, sometimes this very dynamic—or even a happenstance combination of location and expectation—may work against the artist, as well, resulting even in a determination that the object is not really (or fully) “art” at all; for many, this was the case with Serra’s sculpture.<sup>9</sup> Yet if viewers’ values projected onto the already confusing terrain of art’s interaction with its environment help draw the boundaries of social space and art, it is just as true that how viewers respond to different sorts of works in their different contexts maps the viewers themselves—not just by locating them in the cultural landscape, but giving them identity based on that location. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu famously puts it,

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<sup>8</sup> All of the spaces I’ve mentioned share the common feature of setting art apart from everyday life. Traditional spaces like museums are wholly devoted to the sanctification of artworks and/or artists, while unorthodox locations accentuate the differentness of art by placing it in stark contrast to both its immediate surroundings and, more subtly, to artworks which remain “indoors.” The hallmark of domestic art is its *integration* into everyday life— integration that makes its status as art suspect for those who define art by the degree to which it is autonomous from bourgeois culture.

<sup>9</sup> Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, eds. *Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (Cambridge: MIT/October Books, 1991).

“taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.”<sup>10</sup> Closer to home, idiomatic terms for an ‘arrangement of colors on a canvas’ provide an example of the way vocabulary can mark differences between speakers as much as it marks differences between the objects spoken of. “Work of art,” “painting” and “picture” are common terms for one class of object (and may even all name a single specific object), yet a hearer who has had exposure to the world of high art will recognize that the utterance of each term conjures up a markedly different sort of *cultural* object, while simultaneously marking the speaker according to his or her knowledge of, comfort with, and ultimately respect for the conventions of art.

To reiterate, if the relation between viewers, works and spaces is reflexive, reciprocal and mutually-defining, then the factors that play into art perception should be understood to include not just the physical properties of artworks alone, or even the physical spaces in which we find them, but the various social spaces and people necessary to the process of bringing viewer and painting together. Inevitably I must suggest that intertwined with a viewer’s perceptions and valuation of an artwork as a discrete object are his or her implicit valuation of the artist who created the physical work, those responsible for its display in the specific space, and finally, the viewer’s self-perception as one in the role of looking at and judging art. With regards to the perception and valuation of the

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<sup>10</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translation by Richard Nice. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984): p. 6.

artist and intermediaries, these may be based in large part on assumptions drawn from the very surroundings that are themselves being sized up—assumptions about what environs go with “real” art and which do not. What I’ve come back to, then, are strategies of boundary-marking between groups, markets, or ideological factions on one hand, and the creation of individual identities with respect to those boundaries on the other hand, all linked to art places of whatever kind. I’ve already mentioned the negotiated and contingent market roles among women who make, sell, and buy artworks in the Atlanta market as an example of the latter; but for an example of the former (and one which subtly opposes museums and homes) I’ll turn to a form of expression seldom thought of as a tool for the classification of art.

### *Couched Argument*

In no small measure, a single phrase can suggest both the slippery dynamics of boundary-maintenance in the worlds of art and public culture, and some of the issues that are at play specifically in the domestic market that I’ve been studying: “GOOD ART WON’T MATCH YOUR SOFA.” Though I had seen it before, I noticed the statement anew as it appeared on a bumper-sticker seen on cars in the parking lots of the High Museum in Atlanta and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia during the early stages of my fieldwork (and many times since and elsewhere); more recently, the phrase was used on a



billboard along a state highway in north Georgia, advertising a frame shop in one of the many small towns that, once remote from the bustle of Atlanta, have been transformed into weekend retreats for people living in the city. In their individual contexts, both are rife with likely unintended irony, and the migration of this sentiment from one setting to the other may prove to be what is most illustrative about changes in American art-culture in general and Atlanta's domestic market in particular, but I will save a discussion of that dynamic for later in this work.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, I'll begin with the phrase as found in its "original" habitat, and turn to the bumper sticker first.

As an ideological tool and polemical weapon, the bumper sticker is inexact, to be sure – a broadside projecting a very short phrase to an undifferentiated audience of anyone and everyone that happens to be in the vicinity and takes time to look. But appearances aside, there is an elegant twist to this sort of utterance, in that while carrying out its first job of announcing the car owner's position with regards to the subject on the sticker (and effectively

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<sup>11</sup> If nothing else, the anti-sofa mantra's migration from museum parking lot to roadside – from being a defense of a pure and autonomous art to being a sales pitch for art-as-recreational-commodity – indicates that those involved in the art trade have become increasingly savvy at incorporating the ideological and polemical tools once deployed by the high art camp into an art 'worldview' that is attractive to a broad range of potential consumers, including those who might also count themselves as defenders of Art.

The way that the billboard's entire physical context and visual clues shift the emphasis of the phrase away from its exclusionary features and put it to work as an inclusive appeal suggests something more interesting than that one cultural faction is using its opponents' own weapons against them. It is more accurate to state that the voice that speaks from the billboard is actually the *same* voice that spoke from the bumper sticker, albeit having undergone a careful and deliberate – not naïve or haphazard – reassessment of its own position vis-à-vis art and consumer culture, and having realized that both putative camps were populated by the same people.

defining the owner by that position, not to mention that he or she is willing to make cultural statements on his or her bumper), it also implies an audience that is actually *self-differentiating*, whose members divide themselves first between those who do and those who do not have basic knowledge of or interest in the topic of the sticker, and second, between those who agree and those who disagree with the sentiment on the sticker. And given that bumper-stickers often address themselves to polarizing topics expressed in rarely-subtle words and phrases (not to mention their literal “drive-by” nature), the point of such statements isn’t to open a discussion or debate, or even to name those presumed to hold adversarial views, so much as to assert a “fact” that is understood by the person making it (and any reader privy to knowledge of the same implied and pre-existing cultural conflict, however trivial) to decisively close debate on the subject. Bumper stickers, as laughable as it seems, can operate as ideological lines in the sand, saying, “*This is the heart of the matter. Either you agree with me (and you are right), or you don’t (and you are wrong, probably beyond help); there is no in-between, and there is no need for further discussion.*” And even better, “*You know who you are.*” This sort of boundary-marking – often definitive in its pronouncement of what constitutes orthodoxy and/or heresy, dependent on the interested parties’ knowledge of the positions possible, diffuse almost to the point of anonymity yet asserting a *de facto* closure of territorial boundaries through self-segregation, without the parties ever having to explicitly or directly

address their opponents, much less their opponents' arguments – is a good model for the back-handed way boundaries can be asserted between and among cultural fractions in the realm of art.

Looking at this example, what do we make of the fact that this kind of diffused but black-or-white discourse is used here not just in the name of art, but specifically in the name of establishing the proper relationship between (what the cultured viewer is assumed to understand as) *real* art and a piece of furniture? Can that relationship be so important? Why? With the general coarse dynamic of bumper-sticker polemics in mind, the statement that “GOOD ART WON’T MATCH YOUR SOFA” can point us to a specific field of struggle within the generalized field of cultural production that demonstrates how conflict between fractions of classes informs the creation and deployment of much more subtle distinctions between arts, and how arts are themselves used as markers for cultural and class-fraction boundaries. This case exemplifies first of all the strategy of diffused reference to speaker(s) and audience, in that the specific fractions of the art world that are party to its implied conflict remain unnamed, but are by no means unknown. Put simply, “GOOD ART WON’T MATCH YOUR SOFA” is a defense of institutionalized avant-garde art (read: “real” art) and its proponents, against incursions from art more directly implicated in “bourgeois” life.<sup>12</sup> I say “more

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<sup>12</sup> My use of *bourgeois* here is intentionally imprecise to reflect the imprecision of the kind of boundary marking I have been talking about, specifically in the conflict between those who identify themselves as “not bourgeois,” on one hand, and on the other hand, those who may or

directly implicated” because an irony of this particular opposition is that art which has received institutional sanctification (e.g., has been repeatedly exhibited in museums) is almost by definition no longer avant-garde, but is on its way, at least, to being fully integrated into institutionalized elite culture. That very fact (or really, the fear of it) is built into the sentiment of the bumper-sticker, if it is not the actual impetus for it in the first place: if there were no question about the boundary between avant-garde and bourgeois art, no question about where the *speaker* stands in the hierarchy, there would be no need for this kind of statement. In other words, while on one hand it is an attack on a heretical position from the right – from outside of art – it is on the other hand a defense of the *speaker’s* position within the hierarchy of the field of art, threatened not primarily from outside but from inside – from positions further up in the hierarchy that places avant-garde producers and interpreters at the apex of art, and which question whether institutionalized avant-garde art hasn’t itself already slipped into the netherworld of bourgeois consciousness.

In this dynamic of turning attention to a class of art that everyone inside the hierarchy can agree is definitely outside the hierarchy, the specific arena of battle is art’s autonomy from other aspects of daily life – put another way, the

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may not consider themselves to be bourgeois or petty bourgeois, and who may or may not recognize that they have a role in the conflict at all. I, too, will be using the term *bourgeois* in a rather inclusive way because part of my project is to describe practices and attitudes about art and domesticity that – considering the fluidity of economic fortunes in the contemporary American (and Atlanta’s) economy – may be better indicators of allegiance to “bourgeois values” than would be an analysis class fractions in strictly economic terms.

requirement that art be judged according only to criteria generated within the field of art. The idea that art could “match” or “go with the sofa” is heretical in this view because it suggests an outside criterion, and because that outside criterion degrades the work of art to the level of ordinary consumer commodity, on a par with and needing to match other common commodities in no less banal an environment of consumption than the private bourgeois home. Art has become *decoration*. Understood to be a defining practice of the bourgeoisie (and especially bourgeois *women*), looking at art as decoration goes against the very definition of art for a reader associating him/herself with the mainstream of contemporary high art culture, such that the inverse of the bumper-sticker would be even more to the point: ‘IF IT MATCHES YOUR SOFA, IT ISN’T ART.’<sup>13</sup> But what does ‘decoration’ really mean, that it (and the individuals who pursue it) should be so despised? I will return several times to this issue, as it is a more common marker of cultural boundaries and critical biases than one might guess, and even as the term has been indiscriminately used as a marker of “not-serious” or “bourgeois” art by some scholars, the various practices known collectively as “decoration” have remained under-theorized as they touch upon art, at least in

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<sup>13</sup> Familiarity with this art vs. decoration trope is so pervasive that it is not uncommon for it to show up in popular entertainments such as movies and television sit-coms, almost anytime an “artist type” character is called for, usually expressed as that character’s outrage or disdain when an uncultured viewer refers to an artwork as “pretty” or with another term emphasizing its decorative potential [e.g., *The Favor* (1992)].

contemporary contexts.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, we have a bumper sticker whose six words evoke a complex and ongoing struggle over the meaning of art by implying not just contested criteria for judging it (decorative uses), but a whole class of people who are to be disdained precisely because they are alleged to employ these criteria.<sup>15</sup>

Many questions remain to be answered: does such a class of people exist as more than an ideological straw man, or in texts other than a bumper sticker? Do its practices with regards to art actually place decoration above other concerns? In what ways and to what extent might such an alternative ideology pose a threat to the autonomy of the field of art? And finally, does inclusion of

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<sup>14</sup> As Christopher Reed notes, the twentieth century was marked by “the growing divergence of domesticity and modernism, despite—or because of—their intertwined roots in turn-of-the-century culture” [Christopher Reed, ed. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996): p. 7]. But while this assessment is largely true of criticism and scholarship in the twentieth century—at least that devoted to “contemporary” art during the last two-thirds of it—there is a wealth of writing (both period and recent) on the interrelated meanings of domestic decoration and art in the period before that divergence, though revival of art-historical attention to such subjects as the Aesthetic Movement in England and America had to wait until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>15</sup> A whole slew of terms exist in both popular and scholarly writing and talking about art that invokes aspects of this “fear of decoration.” Some of these terms allude to a superficial appreciation of artworks for the decorative use they may have (“decorative,” “pretty,” etc.), a matter complicated when bona fide avant-garde artists include elements in their work that are either intentionally decorative (e.g., Matisse), or too-easily perceived to be decorative (e.g. Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, Hans Hoffman and Robert Motherwell, according to Clement Greenberg (“Avant Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971): pp. 3-27).. Other terms (like “swatch people,” cited in Stuart Platter, *High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): p. 139), are actually directed towards the aggregate of individuals involved in the industry of interior design. These may simply suggest the “goes with the sofa” mentality, but the disdain with which they are used owes as much to the venal and mercenary character attributed to “decorators” as it does to their “superficiality.” In fact, the “design professions,” while overlapping the field of art, also present a specific challenge to the claims of artists, gallery owners, critics and curators to legitimate authority about art matters, which challenge has the additionally galling (to the previous group) quality of translating directly into economic competition.

“heretical” criteria in the process of valuation of artworks mean the exclusion of “orthodox” criteria, or can they co-exist or even overlap? In the course of this dissertation I will argue that “purely decorative work” can have the practical utility of advancing a cultural vision in which the deployment of culturally and individually-salient objects, including artworks in domestic space (i.e., decoration) may, itself, make a personally valid statement, and suggest that the opposition between decoration and art is both shallow and artificial, rooted in intellectual, ideological and economic politics rather than actual experience in real social settings. I’ll be trying, in effect, to recover the actual dynamics of a contemporary bourgeois art (dynamics which might be recognizable to many Americans a century ago, not to mention today) by trying to ascertain exactly *how* art “goes with the sofa.”

### *Plan of the Work*

At its heart, *Picturing Home* is a study of the symbolic landscapes of the domestic art market in Atlanta, focusing on how the practices of making, exchanging and living with art in the context of private, professional-class homes are indicative of bourgeois cultural identity. But it is also about how connecting art with bourgeois cultural identity puts domestic painting beyond the pale of avant-garde definitions of valid art. Entwined with the description of people, places, and practices, then, is a description of how the market fits into the larger

context of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century America, especially its pervasively visual culture and writing about it. Though it has been a subtext of this introduction from the beginning, in the last few pages I have placed ideology near the center of my discussion and used vocabulary specific to class analysis and the sociology of art—especially “bourgeois”—without precisely defining those terms. I will begin to do that in the next chapter, but because I am critically interested in how “art” has been constructed as an antithetical category to “domesticity” and how this opposition continues to influence discussions of both, the first half my dissertation is devoted to describing the way scholarly writing on the social aspects of art markets has perpetuated an ideology with roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Chapter 2 addresses the pitfalls of sociological approaches to understanding art, Chapter 3 addresses two recent field studies of local markets as examples of how methodological decisions can mask ideological bias, and Chapter 4 discusses the historical context behind the divorce of art and the home as part of the gendering of aesthetic creativity as a predominantly masculine pursuit, each chapter examining the place of the literature itself in the creation of the categories of art. Broadly speaking, then, the first half of this dissertation is given to describing the definitions of art against which the works and people of the domestic painting market are thought to stand in sharp contrast.



The second part of the dissertation begins with Chapter 5, in which I propose *intuitive vision* to name the distinctive visual habits and bodily practices of bourgeois domesticity in contemporary Atlanta, especially the role of artworks in the phenomenological space of the home. (Readers already conversant in the sociology of art – especially its Marxist/feminist branch – and familiar with the values of local avant-garde art markets may wish to pass over the first section and proceed directly to this chapter, instead.) Chapter 6 focuses on domestic painting's central quality of *integration* applied to the concrete physical and stylistic features of specific artworks in their domestic settings, to the connection of the market's various agents in a coherent social milieu that is not restricted to their art-related roles, and to the very purpose of aesthetic experience in these contexts. Chapter 7 charts the concrete terrain of 'home-like' spaces devoted to the production and distribution of paintings in the market, while continuing to develop the distinction between phenomenological and sight-based representations of domesticity. This terrain – along with those commercial venues discussed in Chapter 8 that project a more syncretic version of the "look of home" – constitutes the 'public face' of the market, where its collective values and techniques are not only displayed and maintained, but ultimately challenged by the dominant visual culture of Atlanta's connected worlds of art and design. Finally, the Conclusion returns to the way conflict between competing systems of belief about art and life – ideological boundary-marking, in short – has concrete

effects in the contemporary cultural landscape beyond the apportionment of prestige or disdain to groups of people who claim the title “artist,” or who claim decoration as a legitimate use for artworks. By revisiting the statement that “Good art won’t match your sofa,” I will reassess the supposed antithesis between avant-garde aesthetics and the various practices known collectively as decoration, but I will also again take up the question of “What is bourgeois art?” that is not limited to a local importance, but has ramifications for our national culture of art, as well.

## CHAPTER I:

### Writing Art

Whether as critics but also the leaders of a school, . . . or as fellow travellers contributing their reflexive discourse to the production of a work which is always in part its own commentary to or reflection of an art which often itself incorporates a reflection on art, intellectuals have never before so directly participated, through their work on art and the artist, in an artistic work which always consists partly of *working on oneself* as an artist.

Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*. p.108.

Reflexivity makes life hard.

Vera L. Zolberg, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*, ix.

Because all art's meaning is informed by hierarchies in the contested field of culture, fully describing this market means more than outlining the readily observable features of people, places and objects (the task I will take up in the second part of this dissertation); it also means locating it in the range of categories, boundaries and labels that serve to define the world of art as a whole and which are at least partially institutionalized through intellectual discourse. Indeed, the location of this and similar markets within the field of intellectual discourse about art (rather, their conspicuous exclusion from it) helps define not only the art and market type as "domestic," but also the intellectual field of writing-about-art as that which attends to art that is avant-garde, serious,

professional and even sometimes popular, while excluding that which is pretty or decorative, certainly amateurish, and especially *bourgeois*.<sup>1</sup> Such a dual analysis – of the market and its discursive shadow – begs the question of whether the field of art scholarship has the ability (much less the willingness) to answer the question posed at the end of the introduction: “What is bourgeois art?”

Part of the difficulty of seeking its answer stems from the basic problem of producing ‘objective’ writing about the world of contemporary art especially, when the ideological stakes underpinning such questions as “What is Art?” “Who is an artist?” and “What should art do?” are as hotly contested among those of us who study and write about art as by those of us who ‘make’ art in the more conventional sense. And though I am not suggesting that intellectual inquiry into the arts is so flawed as to preclude worthwhile writing on these questions, I am working from the position that intellectual work of all sorts has come to be so entwined in the production of art that the very asking of such questions is itself a constitutive part of the field, the argument of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu cited in the epigraph and expanded upon elsewhere in his work.<sup>2</sup> This being true, then the task of the first part of this dissertation becomes

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<sup>1</sup> That the term ‘*bourgeois*’ (especially when connected to art) may activate for a reader as many unflattering connotations as it does suggests the dynamic of discursive boundary-marking I’m talking about, and why I have chosen to use the term ‘domestic’ for this art, instead. Not only is “domestic” more evocative of the specific physical conditions that surround it (not to mention the ideological associations thereof, as well), it deflects – or at least defers – that question framing my descriptive project, “What is ‘bourgeois’ art?”

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu (1993), p. 110: “The constitution of an unprecedented array of institutions for recording, preserving and analysing works (reproductions, catalogues, art journals, museums

not only to lay the theoretical groundwork for my methodology, or even to demonstrate how it fills a hole in the literature of art, but to begin to contextualize the hole with reference to the role art-writing plays in the perpetuation of cultural hierarchies. To all those ends, this and the next two chapters will focus on different aspects of the critical literature that help a reader understand the purported distance between art and the bourgeois home.

It should not go unstated that the ‘perpetuation of cultural hierarchies’ mentioned above is hardly just an abstract concept; the hierarchies in question play out in practical terms from the large scale to the small: from helping to bolster the autonomy of artistic and intellectual life within the mainstream of consumer capitalist culture, to limiting the range of possible career paths perceived as legitimate by individual artists and intellectuals. This last feature impinges specifically on the conception of my own project since my voice as an academic writer is inflected by my experience as a painter; my explicit participation in the field of art as a producer and the fact that my scholarly project falls within the field of intellectual art-writing and is therefore subject to

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acquiring the most modern works, etc.), the growth in the personnel employed, full-time or part-time, in the *celebration* of works of art, the increased circulation of works and artists, with great international exhibitions and the increasing number of chains of galleries with branches in many countries – all combine to favour the establishment of an unprecedented relationship between the body of interpreters and the work of art, analogous to that found in the great esoteric traditions; to such an extent that one has to be blind not to see that discourse about a work is not a mere accompaniment, intended to assist its perception and appreciation, but a stage in the production of the work, of its meaning and value.”

the same dynamics I propose to critique bring me back briefly to question the need for and possibility of objectivity.

If it is true that authors tend to have at least some personal stake in the subjects they choose to study or the perspectives and techniques they bring to the task (as is certainly true in my case), then it is impractical to establish 'disinterestedness' as a measure of quality. Setting aside any illusions of an abstracted or dispassionate objectivity, then, good scholarship may even rest on the strength of a scholar's interest – or actual stake – in the subject under consideration. This is not to say that scholarly identification with the subject of one's research is unproblematic, and this issue is not far divorced from the question ethnographers face of how to do research in one's own culture when the distinction between positions of Self/Outside and Other/Inside has been compromised and complicated by the pervasively self-aware and self-documentary habits of people in contemporary American society, "auto-ethnographic" practices that at least one writer has defined as a hallmark of postmodern culture.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "To put it in a formula, the culture of advanced consumer capitalism or, less acceptable but more fashionable, postmodernity, consists largely in the processes of self-inscription, indigenous self-documentation and endlessly reflexive simulation." And again: "My simple contention is that the historical conditions of advanced consumer capitalism have occupied the grounds on which ethnography as a special enterprise has traditionally been based. In its everyday practice postmodernity absorbs the ethnographic game, dissolving the boundary between the site of ethnographic experience and the site of ethnographic writing." John Dorst, *The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989): pp. 2 and 204.

But setting aside the polar dangers of claiming a false critical distance on the one hand and “going native” on the other hand, cultural scholars are every day caught up in the struggle to establish and define values, and face the challenge of being both cognizant of and explicit with their readers about their interests in the fields about which they write and in which they work. And for their part, readers ought to expect at least a minimal degree of self-awareness as to these interests on the part of writers, especially those proposing to offer objective analysis of cultural formations, and particularly in cases where methodologies are applied across disciplinary lines in the name of an “outside perspective.” While some level of explicit position-taking is expected (and again Bourdieu is perspicacious when he notes that, “few works do not contain indications of the manner in which the author conceived the novelty of his undertaking or of what, in his own eyes, distinguished it from his contemporaries and precursors.”),<sup>4</sup> such indications often stop short of helping readers site the work within anything but the narrow bounds of its sub-field for fellow-producers – sub-field locations which serve to hide the bigger questions of relationships of power and prestige across the field as a whole. In other words, in the course of ‘de-mystifying’ value systems such as are deployed around art, we must be wary of simultaneously obscuring our own place in the creation of cultural hierarchies, compromising the usefulness of our analysis in the process.

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu (1993), p. 118.

This is the challenge of “reflexivity” suggested by Vera Zolberg in the first sentence of her *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*, which I take as a caveat for all writers, myself included, who propose to describe instances or processes in the creation of artistic value.

Broadly speaking, writers attempting such a description – particularly of more recent art world contexts – have struggled with two key challenges: the first is the difficulty of describing something as complex as art in all its cultural imbeddedness, of determining and applying those investigative approaches that give the fullest account of how art is made and experienced in the specific context studied. Here is where writers from sociology, cultural studies and ethnographic disciplines have had the most impact on the field (especially when these approaches are used in an interdisciplinary fashion, and least when disciplinary boundaries are most rigorously maintained), so in the next chapter I will touch on several recent works which look at art in local contexts using non-“art historical” methods. The second challenge, though, involves the reappearance of the ghost of the same avant-garde ideology that obscured the social processes of art in the first place, and which necessitated/prompted the on-going reassessment of art from perspectives “outside” that of high art. It is evident not only in works that propose to describe what art does in concrete settings, but even in some of the very texts that set forth to debunk theories of art. Therefore, I will highlight how such residual avant-gardism has inflected



otherwise promise-filled works on the state of art cultures in contemporary America.

### *Framing the Questions*

A few texts in particular inform this project at a basic level and bear specifically on the topics I've set before me, as well as suggesting the current state of our sociological understanding of art and art-study together. In using such terms as "field," "class-fraction," and even "heresy" to start the discussion of cultural hierarchies, I have been invoking a theoretical framework, an approach to understanding art as a social process, which draws heavily on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, principally his theory of *fields* as laid out in the essays collected and published as *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). Bourdieu was certainly not the first sociologist to turn his attention to arts, or to argue that the meaning of art is not inherent in the object produced, but in the social relations of all who contributed to its production, distribution and consumption; I will discuss those scholars whose work bears most directly on my subject or is particularly insightful in the next few pages.<sup>5</sup> But Bourdieu's

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<sup>5</sup> Often attempting to account for change in art, scholars of several stripes have focused on different aspects of the social relations occurring in art worlds. In the following pages I will detail some of the most pertinent resources, beginning with Vera Zolberg's *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) as a general survey of the field and its major developments and problems. Though not an exhaustive list, variants of this sociological understanding of art that are most pertinent have come from those who place class-struggle and class ideology at the center of their analysis (theorists like Raymond Williams, as

formulation has several advantages: First, he keeps an emphasis on how individual agents and their divergent, specific, concrete interests come into play within the range of possible positions in the field, but also effecting the range of possible positions. Though social structures and relations condition and constrain the choices of individuals, individuals are not reduced to pawns of the system or its rules because their actions, motivated by their own interests and infused with a “feel for the game” (*habitus*), are part of the process by which the structures and relations are themselves created, reinforced, or changed.<sup>6</sup>

Second, while maintaining that conflict between discrete groups or sub-fields is exacerbated by the fact that boundaries between them are diffuse and permeable, Bourdieu offers a convincing account of the way boundary-marking between competing groups (sub-fields) can involve not only explicit attacks but, just as importantly, negation by a complete lack of attention. This formulation offers a logic by which the relationship between seemingly disparate art worlds

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well as Janet Wolff and, of course, Bourdieu), to those whose primary interest is the production and reproduction of gender hierarchies as well as class ones through the medium of art (Griselda Pollock), to others who concentrate on change as related to individuals' construction of career narratives against and informed by background of economic change (White and White). The term 'art world' came into common use especially through the work of Becker, who in his book, *Art Worlds* (1982) was among first to systematically formulate the way discrete contexts for the production and reception of artworks come into being and persist, change, and die.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu (1993), p. 34. This view is not unrelated to the process Anthony Giddens calls “structuration” in that both posit a dialectic between individual agency and the system of social constraints, the latter actively engaged by the former via an inculcated understanding of the cultural milieu—what Giddens calls “common sense” to Bourdieu’s “*habitus*.” Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

can be understood in a systematic way, by their roles and positions in the whole field:

The duality of the principles of hierarchization means that there are few fields... in which the antagonism between the occupants of the polar positions is more total.... Perfectly illustrating the distinction between relations of interaction and the structural relations which constitute a field, the polar individuals may never meet, may even ignore each other systematically, to the extent of refusing each other membership in the same class, and yet their practice remains determined by the negative relation which unites them.<sup>7</sup>

And third, Bourdieu provides a convincing account of how the historically-situated conflict over cultural authority between the fractions of the dominant class over the past century-and-a-half, has its shadow in the 'master-narrative' of the growth of the autonomy of the field of cultural production, positing that the two competing principals of hierarchization that form the poles of the field of art are those that claim and seek to reinforce the "autonomous" and self-referential system of evaluating art, and, its opposite, a "heteronomous" principle which admits to other than internalist criteria.<sup>8</sup> This last is not

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu (1993), p. 46

<sup>8</sup> "[The literary and artistic field] is thus the site of a double hierarchy: the heteronomous principle of hierarchization, which would reign unchallenged if, losing all autonomy, the literary and artistic field were to disappear as such (so that artists and writers became subject to the ordinary laws prevailing in the field of power, and more generally in the economic field), is success, as measured by indices such as books sales, number of theatrical performances, etc., or honours, appointments, etc. The autonomous principle of hierarchization, which would reign unchallenged if the field of production were to achieve total autonomy with respect to the laws of the market, is degree specific consecration (literary and artistic prestige), i.e., the degree of recognition accorded by those who recognize no other criterion than recognition by those whom they recognize. In other words, the specificity of the artistic field is defined by the fact that the more autonomous it is, i.e. the more completely it fulfils its own logic as a field, the more it tends to suspend or reverse the dominant principle of hierarchization; but also that, whatever its degree

important to me as another or new take on class-struggle, so much as it is important because it helps name the specific stakes in struggles between sub-fields of the field of art (avant-garde vs. domestic, for instance) as the battle for the meaning of art practices, vis-à-vis the autonomy of art from the dominant logic of the marketplace. Simply put, Bourdieu puts the struggle between individuals and groups involved in the arts at the center of analysis, and more importantly, gives us a systematic way to analyze *why* they struggle in the first place.

In his *Art Worlds* (1982) Howard Becker made many of the same basic arguments both about the organization of art worlds according to myriad roles in the production of artworks and performances, and about the permeability of self- and group-defined boundaries; his thorough and pragmatic understanding (a soft de-bunking of the 'artist as creative genius' mythology, really) is the practical basis for much of what has come since. Moreover, Becker sees the mechanisms by which art world participants segregate themselves as examples of what should be a major focus of any sociological study:

One important facet of a sociological analysis of any social world is to see when, where, and how participants draw the lines that distinguish what they want to be taken as characteristic from what is not to be so taken. Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art, what is and isn't their kind of art, and who is and isn't an artist; by observing how members of an art world make those

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of independence, it continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit." *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.

distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world... In addition, art worlds typically have intimate and extensive relations with the worlds from which they try to distinguish themselves. They share sources of supply with those other worlds, recruit personnel from them, adopt ideas that originate in them, and compete with them for audiences and financial support. In some sense, art worlds and worlds of commercial, craft, and folk art are parts of a larger social organization. So even though everyone involved understands and respects the distinctions which keep them separate, a sociological analysis should take account of how they are not so different after all.<sup>9</sup>

But even as he names conflicting claims of legitimacy between art worlds as a major component of change in arts, Becker treats them more as many distinct instances of in-group consensus-building, rather than part of a larger system of conflict and hierarchization that patterns meaning for art as a cultural category.<sup>10</sup> While I believe that such consensus-building is important generally, and I will argue that it is an essential and explicit part of the logic of the domestic painting market, I want to understand the relationship between groups as well as within them. The elegance of Bourdieu's analysis is that it describes the most contentious and culturally fertile of the "intimate and extensive relations" between art worlds as precisely those which pertain to hierarchies of value, embedded in what Becker describes as a vague "larger social organization" of

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<sup>9</sup> Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982): p. 36

<sup>10</sup> "An aesthetic, providing a basis on which people can evaluate things in a reliable and dependable way, makes regular patterns of cooperation possible... From this point of view, aesthetic value arises from the consensus of the participants in an art world... Work becomes good, therefore valuable, through the achievement of consensus about the basis on which it is to be judged and through the application of the agreed-on aesthetic principles to particular cases." Becker (1982), p. 134.

art, but which called by name is the field of cultural production, itself within the field of political and economic power. Though I will suggest instances in which I think Bourdieu's analysis should be extended, by and large, his theoretical framework is that which best helps illuminate the overall structure and stakes of the field of art, within which domestic painting and its practitioners struggle for identity.<sup>11</sup>

To be fair, Vera L. Zolberg has pointed out in *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*, her all-encompassing survey and critique of the field, that Becker's reticence to address the sources or character of competing claims for legitimacy beyond their demographic features is a choice made to avoid questions of value in art, stemming from his view of the sociologist's job as that of impartial and value-free observer – a goal which she believes, though “itself not fully accepted by all social scientists as a legitimate part of their ethos, is consistent and necessary, even if not always achieved.”<sup>12</sup> But one of the things that make artworks more than and/or different from other classes of commodities, and that put art worlds in a class of social phenomena with religion and science, is that

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<sup>11</sup> A case in point is the question of what constitutes ‘bourgeois art,’ especially in the field of painting. Although he gives a compelling account of the full range of Parisian theater from avant-garde to popular, and cites the world of avant-garde painting as the *summa* of the logic of autonomous hierarchization, the gradations of value and audience are considerably less worked-out at the other end of his scale. Even charting the structural location of “bourgeois art” as avant-garde art that has become consecrated and moved to the right (bigger audience, financial returns) doesn't tell us what it does for the bourgeois, and why. In part, this goes to a question of how to translate his principally European-based work to better match the conditions of specifically American culture and class relations, with its considerably more provisional class identities.

<sup>12</sup> Zolberg, p. 201.

art, among other things, is a medium for offering truth claims (about individuals, groups, even whole cultures), to the extent that such claims are generally taken as a central feature of art. Even if a scholar refrains from making his/her own claims about specific evaluative judgments, a study that doesn't take account of the mechanisms of valuation that are at play is not a full analysis. Zolberg herself says: "[By] not bringing aesthetic value to the forefront of his work, [Becker's] approach cannot account for why certain art forms come to be more highly valued than others. It cannot explain why more powerful groups co-opt certain art forms, except perhaps through individual spontaneity or unexplained drift."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, considering the difficulties with objectivity already discussed, there is an additional danger which, again, Zolberg succinctly identifies: "Yet it should be pointed out that by excluding evaluative judgement explicitly, they run the risk of having it slip in inadvertently."<sup>14</sup> This is precisely what happens in two books published on the topic of the workings of art worlds, to differing degrees of explicitness, and with variations in result that I will turn to shortly: Harrison C. White's *Careers and Creativity: Social Forces in the Arts* (1993), and

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<sup>13</sup> Zolberg, p. 202

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201. I will reiterate that the whole scholarship of contemporary art bears the mark of this issue in its omission of serious work on non-avant-garde art that doesn't fit the easy categories of either "popular" or "folk"; and lest I appear to attribute too conspiratorial motives to legions of art scholars, I will note that the first cause of the field's ignoring such markets is quite literally its ignorance of them. The issue of homology between artists and intellectuals (reinforced by socialization of new recruits into both fields, so that even those who might have brought heteronomous-leaning sympathies are taught that such feelings are detrimental to finding recognition within the field) encourages writers to look within the prescribed boundaries, while those who do not may find little reception for their work among their peers.

Stuart Plattner's *High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market* (1998).

Zolberg's caveats about the perils of valuation in sociological studies of the arts are part of her larger project of defining the possibilities and limits of an understanding of how art functions in societies that takes the best features from both sociological and humanistic perspectives. In the course of her project, she crafted an exhaustive review and critique of writing on the arts from de Tocqueville to even then on-going and unpublished studies of the career choices of individual artists.<sup>15</sup> But even as she deftly compares competing theoretical approaches to artistic creativity and the symbolic function of art in complex societies, she does not seek to replace other theories with her own, so much as to suggest how sociologists should proceed to incorporate the best insights of humanists and arts professionals into their long-held belief that art is a social practice. While stopping short of calling for a true synthesis of the perspectives and techniques from each field (rather, she warns against the "mistake" of "forc[ing] social scientists and humanists into a factitious harmony because each might give up too much of their own fields' contributions"<sup>16</sup>), she cites as a central concern that the sociology of art actually maintain the arts as a focus,

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<sup>15</sup> In her preface she thanks Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi for the use of his research data, published with Rick Robinson as "Culture, Time, and the Development of Talent." In Sternberg and Davidson, eds. *Conceptions of Giftedness* (Cambridge U. Press, 1984). Csikszentmihalyi's work on the phenomenological meaning of artworks and other objects in domestic spaces will figure into the later stages of this study.

<sup>16</sup> Zolberg, p. 215.



rather than using them as just another tool to illuminate the larger-scale social features that are assumed to be the sociologists' primary concern.

Maintaining (or establishing) the centrality of the arts in its most simple form means paying attention to both artists and artworks in concrete settings, while not ignoring the questions of quality and value that inescapably arise when discussing art. On the problems faced in doing this, passages from Zolberg's careful (and prescient) analysis of the field bear citation at length; they succinctly characterize some of the peculiar omissions in recent works devoted to suggesting how art contributes to contemporary social and cultural experience, omissions which, along with similar gaps concerning the gendered/spatial contexts of contemporary art markets, limit the incisiveness of those studies. I have already set the hierarchies of value judgments in art (and how such judgments are anything but "disinterested") at the center of my own work, and suggested that those of us writing on art are implicated in the processes of concretizing such hierarchies. Zolberg states that,

Focusing on art is, in a sense, the most problematic aspect of the sociological study of the arts because this brings the scholar to the brink of making value judgments about the subject and, consequently, showing bias. . . . Not only is it important for sociologists to be aware of preconceived notions that cause members of society [themselves included] to reject uncritically the cultural output of certain segments of society, such as popular or mass culture, but they must be equally alert to falling

into the opposite trap— of sentimentalizing the arts of certain groups or permitting nostalgia to obfuscate their thinking.<sup>17</sup>

Both “death of the author” or reception-based concepts of art that almost entirely shift the role of meaning-creation from artists to the myriad other actors in systems of sign exchange, as well as more traditionally-oriented audience-focused empirical research contribute to the problem of art without artists; but the laudable sociological focus on structures of cultural interaction rather than on mythologized individual narratives (“the conventionally popular adulatory view of the artist as romantic genius”<sup>18</sup>) should not lead sociologists to pay too little attention to actual artists:

Instead of ignoring or avoiding understandings of the individual artist proposed by aestheticians and cognitive or social psychologists or psychoanalysts as part of an assumed division of labor in the human sciences, I maintain that it is important to reinsert them into the analysis of social realities of society and artistic practice. This would show the awareness by sociologists of the fact that artists emerge from the interaction of initial propensities for talent and personality characteristics within the constraints of historically grounded opportunity structures, through changing processes and mechanisms of discovery, recruitment, and socialization.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Zolberg, p. 212. As opposed to merely serving as an antidote to bias, however, this same sort of reflexivity suggests the promise of helping both social scientists and humanist scholars work toward a system of valuation that is not *as* implicated in the processes and schemes by which cultural power is bestowed and manipulated. Writing on Jeffrey Goldfarb’s work on the arts in Eastern European countries emerging from communism in the 1980s, Zolberg takes his inclusion “in the category of serious art not only classical or ‘serious’ academic music or fine art, but certain popular arts as well . . . those of sufficient depth and richness to transcend even commercial and functional usage, providing the basis for a continuing conversation rather than a fleeting moment’s entertainment,” as a way by which “the dilemma of democratic quality that seemed oxymoronic to Tocqueville has a chance to be resolved (p. 208).”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*.

Nor should the tendency to lose sight of actual artworks go unchallenged or uncorrected; for if either artists *or* artworks are lost in what purports to be a study of art, then the goal of understanding society via the arts is necessarily compromised:

[Sociologists] are more likely to focus on aspects of organization and process affecting how artists work and how their creations or output are disseminated or marketed in relation to the broader socio-political-economic context of the production of the art. In many cases, however, because of sociologists' concern with the social, the art works themselves become lost in the search for understanding society, ending up as virtual byproducts.<sup>20</sup>

### *Art as Narrative*

Zolberg's project was essentially meta-critical rather than prescriptive, seeking the limits of her field as well as assessing its potential to provide tools needed to map the cultural terrain on which the meanings of art are contested. Three years later, though, sociologist Harrison C. White – whose past writing helped focus attention on the institutional structures that enable large-scale artistic change – published a more hybrid work that drew upon his own field research in the course of putting forth a unifying theory of art: *Careers and Creativity: Social Forces in the Arts*. Unfortunately, *Careers and Creativity* provides a ready example of the conflicted nature of the academic literature of art,

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<sup>20</sup> Zolberg, p. 54.

exhibiting several of the problems about which Zolberg warned. So, before turning to contemporary field studies of specific markets and locales, I'll conclude this chapter with an examination of some pertinent weaknesses of what has variously been hailed as "an original, comprehensive, and profound treatise on art worlds" and castigated as a "highly selective view of . . . an exciting and important field that was [sadly] not better served by this author."<sup>21</sup>

White's theories owe an obvious debt to both Becker and to the many writers who have used a production-of-culture approach to understanding the relationship between artists, artworks and the societies in which they arise. But from the outset – and notwithstanding a chapter focused on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the emergence of the English middle class – White distances himself from Marxist scholars who see direct correlations between art and class dynamics. Instead, (and here very much like Becker) he seems to place the emphasis on social relationships in the mid-range scales of society, below that of classes and class fractions (but allegedly as broad as gender categories), and organizes his theory according to several specifically-updated coinages of terms familiar from social psychology and literary analysis: identity, narrative, and career; control, creativity, and dialogue.

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<sup>21</sup> Gene A. Fisher and Robert R. Faulkner writing in *Contemporary Sociology*, Volume 23, Issue 6 (Nov., 1994), pp 880-882; and Diana Crane writing in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 100, no. 5 (March 1995), p. 1362-1363.

The beginning of his Preface names White's two basic themes: "1. *The shaping of identities – which includes celebrating and arguing for competing identities – generates and energizes the arts.* These identities are for groups – be they families or clans or corporations or categories such as gender – more than they are personal, even in our day. . . . 2. *Particular artworks emerge from a dialogue between artist and art world [emphasis in the original].*"<sup>22</sup> According to White, the "shaping of identities" occurs via narrative, or stories recounted to "render a description and/or celebrate an event," sometimes in the form of an argument, but only rising to his definition of "narrative" when the speaker makes specific reference to a body of knowledge shared by and with his or her hearers:

Narration selects from a cultural palette according to social and strategic context. Identities come with and by narration. When conceived of as spread out over time, identities evoke narrations made up out of stylized stories. An identity thus fleshed out over time is what we call a career, constructed out of familiar stories.<sup>23</sup>

Though he does not reference the literature directly, when White moves on to the next set of three terms, he relies heavily on well-established theories of the interaction between social structure, positions within the structure, and the negotiations and navigations of individual agents within both (cf. my discussion of Giddens and Bourdieu, above); it is unclear, however, whether his addition of a newly-revised vocabulary (including two "modes of narrative" and four

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<sup>22</sup> Harrison C. White, *Careers and Creativity: Social Forces in the Arts* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993): p. xiii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

“senses of identity”) helps or hinders a reader’s understanding of the essential points of the argument.<sup>24</sup> The first point is that “social life consists mainly in routines that lock actors into various niches [control]. . . but each actor, some of the time, tries for fresh action, for action that breaks the routines imposed by ordinary social life [creativity].” White’s specific application of this idea to the arts come from his contention that the arts represent an institutionalization of the “cultural palette” from which actors draw their narrative conventions, and that moments (or careers) of “creativity” are the means by which the palette is expanded and enriched, or suited to a major structural change in society. He also stresses that while “narrative creativity” arises from the “frictions and errors” that occur as individuals move between and among the specific, often-competing interpersonal contexts (the process which generates “identity in the fourth sense”), “dialogue” with the codes and habits of a particular art world or worlds

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<sup>24</sup>The lack of references makes it hard to tell if White has made a new argument or merely re-packaged old ones. At least one reviewer seems to think his re-statements rise to the level of synthesis: “White unites ideas about identity and narrative (which have been gaining currency in other areas of sociology) with his previous contributions in the area of networks, markets, and professions to derive a cohesive theory of the arts and society. In brief, his theory states that identity formation is at the core of artistic production.” [Mabel Berezin in *Social Forces*, v76 n4 (June, 1998) p. 1571.] But Diana Crane, whose work on the avant-garde White does mention in the text, has a rather less laudatory opinion: “*Careers and Creativity* provides a highly selective view of the field using a writing style that is variously colloquial, patronizing, often abstruse, and punctuated with lengthy quotations from other authors. The book contains many good ideas, but too often they remain too abstract, in spite of copious examples, or insufficiently developed. . . . At times, White appears to have set himself the task of creating a sociology of art, as if it did not already exist. Sociological studies that would have illustrated the points he is making are often ignored. The author invokes art-worlds and production-of-culture perspectives, but relevant literature from these approaches is often ignored. . . . This is an approach one might have taken 20 years ago, but, given the extent of the development of the sociology of art since then, it is a pity that an exciting and important field was not better served by this author. (Crane, pp. 1362-1363.)

is that form of narrative creativity which “calls forth” specific artworks.<sup>25</sup> From this connection of individual identity-expression and the social organization that supports and constrains artistic practice grows the centrality of the idea of “career” in arts culture: works have careers in the sense arising out of a process of self-identification and, over time, provenance; for artists, careers are narratives that make connections between (make sense of) a series of artworks made over time, and give a trajectory to future work, and are a record of the paths through artworlds facilitated or hindered by other agents such as critics and dealers and collectors. In sum, everybody has a story to tell, and artworks are the statements that are used to tell the stories.

It may be that the specific benefit of White’s re-statement of key points in the sociological study of art is just that—saying them in a different way for the benefit of new readers. And there are instances in which his examples from wide-ranging periods and genres lead to clear exposition of particular points or main themes that are otherwise confusing; but despite (and in contradiction to) a rather breathy back-cover accolade from cultural historian Paul DiMaggio, his at-best idiosyncratic style of presentation is inconsistent with the goal of demystifying the production of art and its ties to social power.<sup>26</sup> But aside from

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<sup>25</sup> White, pp. 49-51.

<sup>26</sup> In fact, the plethora of new terms and obscure writing style seem at odds with a book allegedly intended as an introductory text. Daniel M. Fox finds that White’s tone “condescends even to the student to whom” the book is directed [*Society*, vol. 33 no. 2 (Jan-Feb 1996) p. 87], while another pair of reviewers attributes the dense writing to the book’s short(?) length: “Unfortunately, the

problems of basic clarity, re-minting the terms of art agency obscures the fact that White re-hashes the hardly-new narrative of avant-garde cultural nobility, effectively re-mystifying some of the very categories he ought to be dismantling.

As he re-works the Pre-Raphaelites from various angles to get at the connections between an evolving style and cultural change, placing the artists firmly in their historical and material context to ward off the imposition of later rationales for judgment of their art (like modern standards of beauty or Modernist concepts of the avant-garde artist), White nevertheless writes them as part of the teleology that posits that very same avant-garde artist as the highest practitioner of the kind of narrative play and rupture by which he defines art, itself. This is not to say he is not acutely aware of the importance of the re-fashioning of the artist/intellectual as a creator and disseminator of an independent (autonomous) cultural realm; in fact White calls it "a real coup to establish the idea that a beholder could gain benefit in his or her own identity by deferring to an artist's expression of that artist's own identity. That is what the avant-garde myth and the genius myth are really all about."<sup>27</sup> But in instances both small and large, he gives evidence that he either believes the myth, or has

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author's decision to keep the book short produces an exposition of the argument that is so often elliptical and incomplete that considerable effort is required to comprehend it. Despite the endorsement on the book jacket referring to the author's accessible style, this book is *not* accessible." (Gene A. Fisher and Robert R. Faulkner writing in *Contemporary Sociology*, Volume 23, Issue 6 (Nov., 1994), pp 880-882).

<sup>27</sup> White, p. 97.



accepted that it is the highest, best, or most appropriate for the current epoch—yet all without an explicit announcement of his naturalizing project.

The clearest examples come in the penultimate chapter, *Professionals and Publics*, in which White directs his attention towards competition for recognition and support among the “mosaic” of identities and the networks they form, and develops his theory of the avant-garde as the institutionalization of genius.<sup>28</sup> Having stated that “renewed obsession with identities” in America has led to a multitude of specific “publics of recognition, . . . intertwined with lattices of competing professionalisms under constructions by artists . . . and shaped by a basic conflict over boundary between professional and amateur,” White spends several pages tracing the idea of “part-time professionals,” to demonstrate that making a living from one’s art is not necessarily the only measure of commitment to being a professional artist. But why part-time artists who “turn away from career and livelihood and conceive their production of art in terms of shaping identities for themselves as well as others, be it as vocation or avocation,”<sup>29</sup> should be separated from the amateurs who pursue goals of “self-

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<sup>28</sup> White, p. 153: “Artists today seek and hope for creativity carried far enough even to be called genius. . . . Through invoking it one does not need to deny either rule or creativity. Genius provides narrative explanation and justification for transcending the paradox between performance and standard. . . . Genius is a whole new narrative framework for style, in which changes, even sudden and drastic, need not deny validity to what already exists. The genius construct can be the core of a social institution as potent as guild or profession. The avant-garde is the narrative for such an institution. . . .”

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 147-148. The various professionalisms discussed here are themselves subject to sorting, according to the size and character of their publics, and the extent to which their work is intended to be received “mainly among peers”: “professions jostle together into larger

expression" is not fully clear until he elaborates his hierarchy of narrative self-expression and view of painting and painters: "[All] painters are also geniuses and members of the avant-garde. That is, all—scores of thousands of them—conceive themselves, at their best moments as pressing forward the frontiers of vision and concept, in opposition to some shadowy in-group called 'the establishment.'"<sup>30</sup> To be a painter in the fullest sense, whether full- or part-time, means conceiving of oneself and one's art in avant-garde terms, looking back while looking forward within the master-narrative of modern art, and expressing identities (even personally and idiosyncratically) in reference to that history.<sup>31</sup> This peremptorily eliminates part-timers who don't profess such goals as amateurs, but also puts certain professionals in a second class as well, as White carefully, subtly demonstrates in his contrasting descriptions of painters Richard Bowman and "a young man [he] will call George Mitchell."<sup>32</sup>

White's account of Bowman's career is closely tied to himself, not just as a teacher or scholar of art, but as a more active participant in the identity-forming

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clustering, which typically award highest prestige to those practitioners most removed from a larger public." This is no small point, (and exactly Bourdieu's description of the principle of autonomous hierarchization) though White treats the matter as if it were a self-evidently natural part of the production of art.

<sup>30</sup> White, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> This is my central quarrel with White's book: that he derails what good might come of re-defining artistic creativity (and quality) according to the dynamics of identity formation (to which could be added "in concrete historical, economic, and class contexts") by using his nascent theory to support well-worn patterns of ideological exclusion.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

role of art—a “collector.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, White tells the reader that he first encountered Bowman/Bowman’s painting when “I bought a wonderful, large oil from Bowman when he was my wife Cynthia’s teacher, evenings, in the Palo Alto art league,” and that his re-connection with the artist thirty-five years later was first because the author was “on the trail of a new acquisition for myself,” and then “because I suspected that Bowman *could be portrayed* as a lineal descendant of the impressionists with their spotty, difficult careers. I was sure also that he was an inheritor of the avant-gardism that their revolution created [emphasis added].” In other words, the narrative we get from White about Bowman is as much about White’s identity and “art” as a scholar/critic and collector of avant-garde art as it about Bowman’s professional history: academic training in Chicago, a fellowship in rural Mexico, then intermittent contact and a few prestigious gallery shows with Abstract Expressionist luminaries, and finally successive short-term teaching posts and fellowships, by and large without commercial success despite (because of) his “forty-odd years painting out the implications of a vision.” White portrays Bowman as the perfect disinterested avant-garde artist (“so original a painter”), making concessions in how he lived, but never abandoning

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<sup>33</sup> The idea of the *collector* as distinct from an art buyer is an important one in avant-garde arts culture and is riddled with both practical and ideological implications I will address in due course. The principal distinction (which White dutifully describes in the section following his comparison of painters) is the attribution to the *collector* a “narrative creativity” analogous to that of artists, which lifts their purchases and agency out of the realm of commerce and into the realm of culture. The implications of the idea that some people possess a rare and “natural” ability to recognize and judge artistic quality gets a rather more elegant (and skeptical) teasing out in Sally Price’s chapter “The Mystique of Connoisseurship,” in her *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001)..

the mythic role White has written for him. And when White says of the artist's work, "Stunning as they were, many others [besides the one purchased by White] of Bowman's canvases in 1957 were hard to conceive living with in one's home. Such canvases could best play their avant-garde role through exhibits," he emphasizes that the painting is an intensely personal narrative (of the painter made available to the collector) and activates the anti-domestic bias to simultaneously elevate his own "eye" (we'll have it in *our* house) while affirming that Bowman's work is not decorative, but suited to advance public culture.<sup>34</sup>

Now compare both content and tone in White's description of "a younger American painter, call him George Mitchell, [who] has aimed to make painting his business as well as his career." In case the reader missed the first announcement that he would be using a pseudonym ("a young man I will call George Mitchell," from three pages earlier), White reiterates that he is using one here; but are we to believe he does so to "protect the innocent" or the guilty? He continues:

I learned much watching George, a student early on in my sociology of art courses at Harvard. Mitchell, unlike Bowman, has a livelihood as well as a career, of that he made sure. To these ends George, who was very intelligent, meticulously planned, was disciplined in production, and was attentive to the gods of foundations as well as

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<sup>34</sup> White, p. 156. (all citations this paragraph) Other aspects of White's avant-garde ballad include its beginning ("Onslow Ford had, back in Mexico, spotted the moment of Richard's maturing an original vision." (p. 157) ) and the certification that Bowman's project was expressly communicative, tirelessly pursued: "Bowman's primary narrative is in and of his works. Creativity Bowman did have. It welled forth in series after series, with as many as one hundred per series, mostly of oils, large canvases as often as small" (p. 158).

commerce. His choice of this liberal arts college, even though it offered only makeshift provision for studio instruction, was unusual. It was an early career calculation.<sup>35</sup>

The vocabulary White uses here is hardly neutral. Contrasted to Bowman's almost haphazard (i.e., not orchestrated) sequence of career events and positions, White describes Mitchell's path as coolly "calculated," down to a college choice he must have made when a seventeen-year-old. Even his choice of medium is the result of market analysis, rather than passion or specific talent, and described by White as a "key" which Mitchell could "keep turning," rather like an experimental rat (albeit a "clever" one) presses a lever for food or other reward:

Mitchell's particular key, which Bowman never turned, was multiple-impressions art, that is, engravings and prints and all their varied progeny. Mitchell often crossed such work with collage and such. Often there would be clever ways to add a touch of handwork to each in a series of prints, increasing their value.<sup>36</sup>

The implication here is that the "touch of handwork" is ersatz personalization – making "singular" what is by its very nature a multiple (i.e., not original) work. But this is consistent with the artists' program, since while still an undergraduate, we are told, he was "exquisitely crafting sets for selling, *perhaps to dentists' offices,*" later expanded to include "suites and corridors . . . lobbies of banks and major businesses" (emphasis added). Mitchell was focused on the "more reliable path for a visual artist to good livelihood within this huge economy, [which is] fastening on as a component in the production process for

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<sup>35</sup>White, p. 159.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

finished space. Such catered space is by far more for business than for home." If painting for the home is a suspect market, at least it still has the potential for the personal narrative of the artist to speak to or for the buyer (collector); painting for a market of corporate lobbies and dentist's offices seems here like an abyss of impersonalism, despite (because of?) its identity as savvy business practice. Yet again, that is the contrast White draws between Mitchell ("with looks and charm to spare. . . a performer, a formalist, able to offer what fits") and Bowman ("himself an awkward bear of a man, gripped by a master narrative, his vision of the master narrative of our time, science"): impersonal reportage (White's "narrative of the first mode") vs. identity ("narrative of the second mode"). And though White says that Mitchell's calculated use of hand finished multiples can "remind us" of Monet's practice of staging series of works, he does not actually equate the two artists, since it is clear that the former lacks the latter's original "genius."<sup>37</sup>

Finally, then, White chooses to present the two artists as a pair of binary opposites in terms of purity of artistic goals and practice. He goes on to reproduce the most basic and trite kind of comparison of a "scientist painter," a struggling but pure and gifted genius with a singular, original vision (which also happens to be the "master-narrative" of our time) against a "business painter," who despite skill and uniformly high quality of craftsmanship lacks a real soul of

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<sup>37</sup>White, p. 159-161.

art— that spark of narrative creativity expressed as genius. White claims that “we should of course be on guard against the avant-garde tendency toward caricaturing any artist, Mitchell or Bowman, as being either wholly pure or wholly crass, wholly maverick or wholly conforming,”<sup>38</sup> but he does not then actually follow up by asserting that the two painters *are* anything more than the caricatures that he has presented. Instead, the repeated verbal wink to the reader, pointing out that “George Mitchell” is the one, single, and *only* artist to whom he feels the need to give a pseudonym, invites the reader to agree that even “George Mitchell,” himself, would likely recognize that he is a “hack” or “sell-out.” White seems to be displaying a certain smug knowledge in identifying him as such, but also to be saying, “he plays the game well, so I’m not going to give it away for him.” By contrast, the image of Bowman that emerges from his account is right out of the (this?) textbook for avant-garde artists: internally-driven, moved by a “master-narrative,” noticed by a few fellow insiders who understand his pure impulse and even “spot the moment of [his] maturing an original vision.” The point here is not just that the two seem to be caricatures, but that White’s claimed attention to the subtleties of narrative and the interconnections and slippages between the multiplicity of artworlds is belied by what is little more than a re-packaging of old categories in new wrappers. Again, Bourdieu’s description of the field of culture as rhetorically organized by

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<sup>38</sup> White, p. 162.

the relationship between opposing poles rings true; as does Zolberg's statement of the necessity for critical circumspection.



## CHAPTER II:

### Views from the Field

[D]ecorators, or “swatch people,” . . . have no interest in developing a collection as a personal aesthetic statement and are not involved in the contemporary visual art world. They buy art as part of their decorating scheme, and their connection to the local art world consists of sporadic purchases of art as part of redecoration activities.”

—Stuart Plattner, *High Art Down Home*, p. 140.

Any scholarly understanding of what art does in contemporary culture that seeks to go beyond the practice of attributing transcendent autonomy to “great” works of art and making the identification of such “greatness” a primary goal must take into account the following: the relations between social actors, the physical objects themselves (because those objects are both the visible traces of social relations and tools by which relational connections are traced), and finally, not just the figurative “terrain of art,” but the concrete physical spaces in which both social patterns and material objects are made and displayed. Admittedly, putting all these elements together is no easy task. Unfortunately, recent book-length works on the subject—while adding pieces to the puzzle of understanding contemporary art—have therefore only given us a piecemeal account of patterns in our “national” arts culture and (even more troubling) of even local contexts as

well. In this chapter, I'll continue to examine the difficulties of writing about contemporary art by looking at two field-work-based studies, while leading the discussion towards the historical context of biases against women's and decorative art, in particular.

### *Art in Houses*

One of but a few book-length works published in the last decade in this area, David Halle's *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home* (1993) has much to offer from the standpoint of intellectual aims and methodology, yet in its attempt to apply some empirical rigor to research on art in real-world settings, the author leaves out much of the complexity of art as a cultural practice that bridges public and private discursive fields. Art worlds figure hardly at all in his study – and artworks as objects with physical (and symbolic or emotional) trajectories through cultural space barely any more – because his focus is on drawing conclusions about broad cultural trends and conditions (housing, the state of the family, race relations, etc.) that can be identified by looking at the subjects of displayed artworks. And with an eye towards art theorists of all stripes, he goes so far as to deny the widespread significance of tastes in art as a meaningful marker of class difference.

At its heart, Halle's book has the populist aim of countering theories that stress the relative unimportance of the public as a source of cultural meaning and

interpretive schemes for art; to do so he correctly tries to move the study of art from public spaces to the private ones of the domestic scene, and turn the reader's ear from the strident voices of arts and culture professionals to the more subtle murmurings of everyday Americans. He begins the book with the observation that,

For every period except the modern, we look at art in the context in which it was displayed and viewed. . . . What about the context of modern Western art? Since the waning of the Middle Ages that context has been, increasingly, the private house. Think, for instance, of paintings. Certainly in the last 150 years the majority of paintings have been originally purchased by individuals who wish to hang them in their homes. Yet there are few studies of paintings in this context.<sup>1</sup>

One might think, then, that the idea of "art" as it is understood by the residents of the more than 160 houses he sampled in and around New York City would be a focus of his research; in fact, his purpose was slightly different. Halle was after "art" as an example of cultural production, the meanings of which many of the most influential scholars have suggested are established and controlled by elites of one sort or another. Halle wanted to demonstrate that the public plays an active and independent role in such meaning creation, often using cultural forms in other ways and to express different social realities than those approved by the so-called forces of domination, and in such ways that such alternative uses can have effects in the production cycles of those very cultural forms (like art):

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<sup>1</sup> David Halle, *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): pp. 1-2.

Analyses of modern art and culture that consider only the artists and the critics and the forces that motivate them are inevitably incomplete. What is missing is the audience – a theory of what accounts for the popularity of certain styles with an audience, for in the end few artists work in a vacuum for themselves alone, without regard to the reception of their work. . . . Above all, what is lacking is an understanding of art and cultural items in the audience’s own terrain, namely the social life, architecture, and surroundings of the house and neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

As one model, Halle names the work of T.J. Clark and Robert Herbert on the role of 19<sup>th</sup>-century suburbanization in the development of Impressionism and modernism, noting their attention to “forms of dwelling and modes of transportation to reach those dwellings.” He goes on to suggest that the accelerated pace of suburbanization in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century may have similar influences on art of this period; but to find out, Halle argues, “we need not only to focus on the suburban context of most modern life but also to enter the houses themselves, look at a range of trends in addition to suburbanization, and link the art and culture within to the social life of the house and its neighborhood context.”<sup>3</sup> A point to make however, is that Impressionism didn’t just arrive in the private salons of the Paris Bourgeoisie unannounced or unbidden, it was articulated as a style by the artists and critics themselves, who were just as steeped in the experiences of suburbanizing Paris as were the “audience.” Nevertheless, Halle describes the seeming disconnect between, on one hand, contemporary art, criticism, and theory as it has grown since the early days of Modernism, and, on the other hand, the experiences of Americans not

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<sup>2</sup> Halle., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

obviously involved in the arts, expressed as an unacceptable degree of privilege given to the opinions of artists and critics in previous writing about what art means and how it means it, whether that writing emerges from the institutions of high art itself or from social theorists trying to understand the relationships of cultural power.

None other than Howard S. Becker, author of *Art Worlds* gives Halle credit specifically for having debunked both humanist mystifications and the “cultural capital” theories advanced by Bourdieu and other writers on class and cultural formations by demonstrating that most people – from the urban working-class to suburban middle-class, and even the Manhattan elite – display art “for rather Philistine reasons, more than half [of upper class members] explaining that the [even abstract] paintings are decorative and suit the other furnishings of the house.”<sup>4</sup> To Becker, “this is a book which should have been written a long time ago,” since despite various studies of material culture that sought to understand the link between class and tastes in household objects, no one has “paid serious attention to the art people have in their homes *as art*”<sup>5</sup> (emphasis in the original). Moreover, to Becker, Halle ultimately uses his fieldwork,

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<sup>4</sup> Howard S. Becker, in *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 23 (6), November 1994: p. 882. Halle makes the important point that European class identities should not be equated too directly with those on this side of the Atlantic, since they are more well-defined than American ones, having much longer histories. However, his reading of Bourdieu focuses exclusively on the work on European museum publics and taste (*Distinction* and *The Love of Art*), rather than on the more elaborate but also more far-reaching explanations of the inter-relation between the structures, agents and forms of cultural production which have been so helpful to the framing of this dissertation.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* In addition to Becker – and whose work on the meaning of household objects was mentioned by Becker in his review – Eugene Rochberg-Halton wrote a review of *Inside Culture* in

to test the three most common theories in the role of art and culture in class politics, and finds the theories deficient. Veblen's vision of art as pure status symbol, the Frankfort school's description of it as an instrument of ideological domination wielded by corporate capitalism, Bourdieu's theory of art as a form of "cultural capital," possession of which determines access to the dominant classes – all failed to make sense of what Halle has found out about the art people have in their homes. He is most critical of the idea of cultural capital.

... What Halle suggests, in their place, is a notion of the public as active participants in the art-making process, actors whose tastes are not coerced by the objects presented to them by artists and art mavens, but whose choices in fact have some effect on what those people do. He has made that case."<sup>6</sup>

But has he, really? What Becker finds to be the most sweeping point of Halle's work is made rather more clearly in Becker's own work than in *Inside Culture*, itself. This is not really an indictment of Becker's motives – since we are all drawn to those features of others' scholarship that seem to bolster our own hypotheses – but it is a suggestion that Becker's view of Halle's data through the lens of his own well-founded belief in the centrality of social networks in the meaning of art has artificially intensified the vividness of Halle's picture of the connection between art makers and art buyers. In fact, it is Halle's singular lack

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which he similarly (but more accurately, I think) highlights elements of Halle's work that are parallel to his own work on the construction of self as mediated by personal objects and surroundings. Hence, "[Halle] amply demonstrates that the American home is an ongoing show-and-tell of the beliefs of its inhabitants, revealing the myriad influences – conscious and unconscious, conventional and personal – that make up the meanings of art and the self." (*American Journal of Sociology*, volume 100, issue 4 (Jan. 1995): 1068-9.) Interestingly, his take on Halle's engagement with art and culture theorists is less hyperbolic ("Halle is not saying bye-bye Bourdieu, farewell Frankfort, and so-long to status-striving theories of culture so much as insisting that culture is more fluid and multidetermined than these theories usually admit.") than either Becker's or the dust-jacket endorsement of fellow Columbia sociologist (of art) Harrison White ("Civilization thematics – suburbanization, fragile intimacy, and audience resonance as shaper – persuasively peripheralize Bourdieu and, especially, Frankfort on social class. . ." from the back flap).

<sup>6</sup> Becker (1994), p. 882.

of attention to the specific social and interpersonal relationships implied (and occasionally mentioned outright) in his interviews that is his book's greatest weakness. To the contrary of Becker's perceptions, when respondents mentioned that the works under discussion were made by someone the owner knew, Halle usually passed up the opportunity to analyze the connection in any depth. In several cases, paintings by family members – the interviewee's daughter, or wife – offered a chance to look at family relationships as the impetus for bringing art into one's home and the connections between the home and the public world of art, especially when the work's apparent skillfulness indicates training, if not professional standing as an artist.<sup>7</sup>

In his chapter on landscape, Halle mentions the one clearly class-related difference between the percentage of home-owners from each sample area who knew the identity of the person who created the art in their homes; whereas 64% of wealthy individuals knew this information, Halle tells us that only 6% and 12% of residents in each of the two the working-class neighborhoods studied knew, "and in almost all of these cases that was because the artist was a relative or friend of the artist."<sup>8</sup> On the other end of the economic scale from the

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<sup>7</sup>"In a Greenpoint living room is a landscape, painted by the adult daughter of the residents. It depicts the scenery around their vacation cabin in upstate New York." (not pictured) [Halle, p.74.] and "There is only one landscape in this [Manhattan] house that refers to the current period. It was painted by the wife and is a beach scene of contemporary France, without figures (fig. 38)." The next work mentioned by Halle is also the work of the wife, a photo "of the view from their Cape Cod vacation house and contains no figures, just two tiny speed-boats (fig. 40)." The beach scene illustrated by fig. 39 is in a technically-proficient photorealist style with abstract compositional elements vying with the literal subject for importance. (both Halle, p. 76).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

working-class homes in which residents' family relations seem to be the only (not to say unimportant) direct connection to art producers, Halle gives an example from Manhattan that seems to be another obvious link between the private world of art and the art market: Halle is told that the owner of a painting by Helen Frankenthaler knows the famous artist. Again, the author does not pursue whether it is the friendship or the fame of the artist or both that the owner finds worth mentioning, or what role the friendship had in bringing the painting into the house.<sup>9</sup> It is ironic that a study which advances a hypothesis about the fragility of contemporary family relationships based on the representational content of the artworks observed gives such short shrift to the relationships implied and embodied by the actual and specific art objects themselves.

The interrogation of art objects within contemporary houses is certainly a worthwhile and necessary approach (and forms the fieldwork backbone of my own study), but without attention to those just-as-pertinent interpersonal connections, Halle's formulation of the relationship between the material conditions of society and representations of those conditions lacks a clear channel through which different priorities of desires are expressed and communicated between individuals or groups:

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<sup>9</sup> Halle, p. 131. What we do not learn from Halle is whether the percentage of the wealthy who knew the artist personally (whether family or friend) was comparable to that in the working-class neighborhoods. From his descriptions alone one would deduce that the personal connection between homeowner and artist was even more common (important?) among the professional classes.



I do not suggest, in this study, that the audience “creates” new meaning in the way than an individual artist creates a new work. But I do suggest that many meanings emerge or crystallize in the context of the setting in which the audience views the works (house, neighborhood, and the family and social life woven therein); . . . and that these new meanings then have an impact on twentieth-century elite and popular cultural history via people’s “demand” for certain kinds of art and cultural items that are suitable repositories for these meanings.<sup>10</sup>

Halle’s efforts are to discredit theories that artists and their agents determine meaning, while returning some credit to contemporary audiences for not only making their own use of art, but also influencing the creation of works that satisfy their desires for cultural expression. But exactly how the audience and producers communicate in the market remains ill-defined, a point suggested by the author’s use of quotations marks around both “create” and “demand” in the paragraph above. Lacking an answer, we are left to presume some sort of insulating “cultural airlock” through which art objects are passed from maker to buyer, and from studio to living room, a model that reproduces an artificial dichotomy between the production and consumption sides of the market and blunts Halle’s critique even as he takes his fellow social scientists to task for their lopsided understanding of the flows of cultural meaning. Yet both “create” and “demand” are fairly literal versions of what can (and does) happen in local settings, in rhetorical and concrete transactions. In banishing purveyors of “official” art ideology (because there has been too much said about them already) he misses the part of the meaning of “art” that is constructed through

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<sup>10</sup> Halle, p. 11.

public and private discourse about art as a cultural category; he also misses the part of the audience's influence on the market that is exerted by engaging with it via expressions of the audience's own ideas of what art is (or is not), in reactions to media coverage of the subject, for instance. Even more important than these "public" conversations, though—and emerging most organically from the very ground of which Halle speaks—are the interventions generated when members of the audience enter the marketplace of ideas and objects directly, through their own creative work, or by engaging with (buying, hanging, discussing) the creative work of family, friends, or other persons known to them. Producers—whether artists or critics—must come from somewhere, after all. In the end, and despite Becker's approbation, Halle doesn't tell us much about *art* as a cultural category or practice at all, but uses art to make some interesting conjectures about features of contemporary American life as they are played out in and around the home.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> That there is a correlation between the suburbanization of American life (through which even small urban backyards have transformed into private "landscapes of leisure") and the calm, "depopulated landscape" that is the kind of painting he found to be predominant in all classes of homes studied is probably his central point, used to bolster the overarching argument against top-down theories of art's meaning. Linking such imagery to the "common modern orientation toward nature—to the countryside and the shore—as scenery to drive past, whether as commuter or tourist, or as the arena for trips and leisure" (Halle, p. 71), preferably enjoyed in solitude or in the company of close companions, Halle footnotes various art historians who have also traced the origins of landscape paintings to the leisurely "mode of living" of its patrons. Also interesting are parts of his argument that the decline of the formal portrait and the proliferation of family photos indicate a changed outlook on what aspects of personal identity are thought to be most important, and how those should be displayed. While some of his evidence supports his emphasis on the "fragility of the modern family" (an 8-panel multiple portrait of one family was reduced to six panels after a divorce, when the wife removed the two images of herself from the two each of her husband and daughters, p. 112), his data on multiple-photo displays in particular

Yet even this goal is not immune from problems: extrapolating a “typical” American home from Halle’s selection of several admittedly-diverse communities in and around New York City suggests that the study is at once too specific and too generalized to be definitive statement about art and class in “the American home.” While Halle makes a reasonable assertion that New York’s status as the center of the world art market should mean that metropolitan residents can be expected to have been exposed to more than their fair share of official art culture, and so make a perfect sample against which to test whether those top-down cultural values actually penetrate the spaces of the home, in some ways his argument about the suburbanization connection is limited by (or perhaps should be explicitly periodized with reference to) the ages of the suburbs studied – the most recent being developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Common desires for personalized leisure space notwithstanding, suburbanization is not a seamless or undifferentiated process, and it has progressed at different paces and with different results in different regions and specific locales, especially as coupled with the cycles of “re-urbanization” (a.k.a., gentrification) that have occurred in the past forty years, and the emergence of such new quasi-urban forms as the “edge city.” Just as Impressionism and Modernism emerged with the specific geographical transformations of Paris after the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the changing and regionally-specific characters of

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could as easily be interpreted as suggesting an understanding of the contemporary “self” as an on-going and ever-changing entity.

contemporary “suburban” domesticity have their own visual logics which should not be glossed over in the search for a generalizable thesis addressing imagery in the home.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps Halle’s work has been original enough to the field and his conclusions defined broadly enough that over-simplification of the complexity of contemporary cultural (even suburban) geography along with the omission of the agency of people who create and distribute the artworks at which he looked are little more than quibbles. Despite its shortcomings, *Inside Culture* still represents an important piece of the puzzle that is the contemporary meaning of “art”; and if it did nothing else besides helping to restore the private home as an arena for art that is worthy of intellectual consideration it would have made a significant contribution. Nevertheless, I am reminded of Zolberg’s call for a more complex kind of sociology of art and her specifically-appropriate

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<sup>12</sup> Halle frequently cites Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier, the Suburbanization of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) as a source on the dynamics of suburbanization and twice (in footnotes) credits Sharon Zukin’s *Loft Living Culture and Capitol in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers U. Press, 1989) for its exploration of the cultural and economic dynamics of the redevelopment—initially by artists—of New York’s SoHo district. Zukin’s work describes a wholly-different relationship between art and domesticity than does Halle’s, one in which an ‘aesthetic’ is more clearly and instrumentally tied to a transformed material (formerly industrial) environment. One text that address more recent transformations in the patterns and linkages between residential and commercial development, and on larger scales, is Joel Garreau’s *Edge Cities: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Another particularly evocative study of the connection between art, suburbia, and conditions of post-modernity is *The Written Suburb*, John Dorst’s “post-ethnography,” of the Brandywine River/Chadd’s Ford region of Pennsylvania, which is intimately associated with the Wyeth family of painters. Yet some of the sharpest insights into how the broad cultural patterns of the post-modern West are inscribed on and in contemporary American homes—particularly with reference to artworks as integral parts of domestic space—are delivered almost incidentally by Denis Wood and Robert Beck in their *Home Rules* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), which links a very localized and codified spatial practice (the rules of Woods’ own house) to an ever-widening series of socio-familial, geographic, and economic contexts.

admonition not to let the art and artists be lost in the sociological scale of the research.

### *Art in the Provinces*

In my search for models of work which can deepen our understanding of the contemporary state of the arts (especially in “non-elite” settings that seem the sites most likely to display the nature of bourgeois art), I have sought to emphasize two broad areas: first, the extent to which such works’ methodologies admit and set out to describe the complexity of how people experience artworks (from creation to consumption) by attention to both the works themselves as physical objects located in successive specific and concrete spaces, and also to the myriad actors required to make a market as they negotiate their various positions in social and cultural space; second, the extent to which questions of value embedded in the complexity of a market are addressed directly and with (self-)awareness of the writers’ own place in the structures of cultural hierarchy. If Halle’s work falls short in the first area by looking at only the domestic “final context” of an all-inclusive set of artworks, Stuart Plattner’s *High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market* (1996) fails primarily in the second, as he goes to the other extreme by focusing so explicitly on anti-domestic avant-garde ideology that he takes its mystifications and definitions at face value, even when his own research seems to suggest other conclusions than those he draws

about the contradictory relationship between avant-garde and “decorative” art, between the high-art market and the world of ordinary commerce.

Like Halle, Plattner sought to bring the methods of social science research to bear on the meanings of art, emphasizing the roles of relationships and explicit expressions of cultural values in a research locale (St. Louis, Missouri) which by its remoteness from New York nevertheless similarly highlights New York’s centrality to American art culture. As “ethnography” in the title announces, Plattner’s study centers on in-depth interviews with local informants, set against a background of the specific economic and social landscape. He sets as the key problem to be studied the question of how artists cope with the central contradictions of the “high-art” market: the fact that valuation of the artworks seems not to be based on rational market principles nor on obvious or widely agreed-upon standards of quality, and that the artist him- or herself must try to make a living from art while simultaneously denying an economic motive in doing so. This second aspect, especially, is an ideological one, going directly to the heart of “high-art” culture, and Plattner makes individuals’ negotiations with each other and the market in light of that ideology the center of his analysis. Furthermore, he argues that St. Louis is a “provincial” art center representative of art worlds across the United States that have in common both cultural and geographic remoteness from New York, and a resultant inferiority complex described as “cultural cringe”:

Art created in a regional market, “not in New York,” (or “not in Paris,” or “not in London”), suffers a devaluation of its perceived quality *at home*, independently of the objective qualities of the work, simply because it is not in a hegemonic center. . . . This is the situation for most art market actors all across the country, if not the world, and the material in this book can be generalized to all such representative communities wherever they exist.” [emphasis in the original]<sup>13</sup>

Though Plattner’s strategy of conducting interviews with locals *in situ* in studios and galleries is similar to Halle’s fieldwork technique, Plattner’s ethnographic mindset is clearly different from that of a sociologist, and the two authors’ aims and perspectives are almost diametrically opposed. Where Halle sought to demystify art and question the values of avant-garde culture, Plattner seeks to explore and explain the intricacies of that same culture, and show the difficulty of operating within its bounds. Where Halle proposed to demonstrate that avant-garde ideology was meaningless to and exerted no influence on a majority of people who experienced art in their homes, Plattner sought to show that the ideology is anything but irrelevant, and that its expression in St. Louis illustrates the repressive hegemony of the New York-centered avant-garde art world. And though Halle seems to have relished an iconoclast’s identification with his everyday subjects, he nevertheless held up the ideal of statistical detachment and random samples as the basis for his hypotheses; Plattner, in contrast, pursues the ethnographer’s goal of understanding the local arts culture as a coherent whole—complete with boundaries of in- and exclusion policed by the members of the community, themselves—by immersing himself in it. In this

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<sup>13</sup> Plattner, p. 3.

case, those boundaries also equate to what/who is covered and what/who is not, and come into play almost immediately, with the locals getting from Plattner, himself, more than a little help in guarding the walls. Plattner depends largely on his own knowledge and perceptions of the specific scene, and makes no bones about self-selecting whom to study:

The set of sixty-five artists interviewed, selected from a list of approximately eight hundred in St. Louis (see chap. 4), is heavily weighted toward the fine-art and professional artist end of the spectrum – which I call *avant-garde*. I did not draw a random sample because I already knew the important types to interview, and I wanted to interview the representative, interesting individuals among those types. . . . A random sampling would focus much more on hobbyists, craftspersons, and on designers and commercial artists, since they form a much larger part of the total than is represented here. [emphasis in the original]<sup>14</sup>

In his preface, he indicates his own art high-art training and – through his wife and many artist friends – continued connection to the field of art, and perhaps it is his being so steeped in them that he is able to give so thorough an account of the values of the *avant-garde*; yet this is but one of several instances in which Plattner's position vis-à-vis the ideology he describes is curiously unclear. Is this merely a faithful description of the culture he studies, with judgment withheld? This would be consistent with the traditional expectation that the ethnographer's job is to provide unbiased observation, but that is a difficult task

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<sup>14</sup> Plattner, p. xi. According to the author, his general knowledge of 'who is who' in the market was based on having lived in it for 14 years ending in 1985, during which time his wife, a professional artist (of the *avant-garde* variety), taught at Washington University while also exhibiting and lecturing at local galleries and museums. The research was conducted during her visiting professorship in 1992, when he elicited information from trusted (elite) actors in the market about which artists met his criteria. (p. x.)



to carry out immersed in one's own culture, and there is (surprisingly) no explicit announcement that such detachment was his starting point. To the contrary, he is clearly sympathetic, if not empathetic with the struggles of the artists he studied. And if his work is a critique, then it is only a partial one: as he discusses the difficulties most artists have of surviving under avant-gardism's rules and the way that his few examples of artists that operate outside its bounds are subject to scorn from those within, the ramifications of this ideology for the (re)production of cultural power and prestige even within the local community and at the local scale are treated as a permanent, perhaps *necessary* feature of the "artist's social compact." In fact, Plattner's most effective piece of supporting evidence that the ideology he describes is hegemonic – repressive, yet "naturalized" in cultural discourse to the extent that those oppressed are implicated in their own subjugation – is his tacit acceptance of its values, himself. On the other hand, it is also precisely *because* Plattner seems to completely identify with the "autonomous" artist/intellectual's worldview (while still aspiring to the ethnographer's objective viewpoint) that his is such an accurate – not to say complete – portrait of it. At least as important as what he says about the avant-garde art market is what he does *not* say, for his omissions are avant-gardism's deliberate occlusions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>In this regard, Plattner is nothing less than the voice of what Bourdieu has described as the "autonomous principle of hierarchization" within the field of cultural production. In fact, Plattner's work is an exquisite example of the kind of linkage that exists between intellectual literature of art – whether from humanist critics or social scientists – and the avant-garde

One of the most obvious (and obviously ideological) omissions from his study is that of anything more than cursory attention to the role decorators and designers play in the market. Plattner's study involved interviews with about 135 people involved with the St. Louis art market, almost half (65) of the interviews being of artists, the rest made up of art dealers, collectors, and local museum staff and academic faculty, with some overlap between these groups; but significantly, not a single decorator or designer was cited, despite their obvious (from Plattner's own text, even) contribution to the market in economic terms. Granted, his stated goal was to compose from these interviews not only a picture of the complexities and contradictions of the business of art, but also to articulate the system of boundaries and categories that comprise the avant-garde worldview; but in this case, the avant-garde categories and boundaries he articulates (and accepts at face value) *preclude* an accurate or full picture of the concrete market itself, much less its cultural complexities and contradictions. He rightly (if seldom critically) states that the rules by which artworks' or artists' status within or without those boundaries are constantly in flux, and that there was not always even agreement among his interviewees as to who was in which

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"audience," including the traditionally-defined 'producers' of art, the artists: "Critics serve their readerships so well only because the homology between their position in the intellectual field and their readership's position within the dominant-class field is the basis of an objective connivance . . . which means that they most sincerely, and therefore most effectively, defend the ideological interests of their clientele when defending their own interests as intellectuals against their specific adversaries, the occupants of opposing positions in the field of production." [Bourdieu (1993), pp. 94-95.] It is precisely because Plattner "serves his readership well" that his study and his claims about art bear the close examination that follows in the next few pages.

camp; but there was apparently no equivocation or confusion as to the status of decorators:

Interior designers decorate their client's walls with art the same way that they help choose furniture. Their status in the art world, where *decorative* often means an insult, is fairly low. A dealer offered his opinion of designers: 'designers are evil, hateful people. Write that in your notes.' His contempt was not for their aesthetic taste, but for their business practices.<sup>16</sup>

Here both Plattner and his quoted source are speaking specifically of professional designers and decorators, and the "business practice" in question is claiming a percentage of sales from the gallery to a client, even if they were not directly involved in selecting the artwork – a practice the author elsewhere equates with dealer's own claims on artists' studio sales.<sup>17</sup> According to Plattner, in these cases, "dealers may pay the requested commission to forestall the designer's influencing the buyer or spreading rumors that the dealer does not

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<sup>16</sup> Plattner, p. 162. Despite Plattner's confirmation that the dealer's primary claim against decorators had nothing to do with aesthetics and everything to do with business practices, this is only true because Plattner and the culture for which he speaks deny that decorators *have* a meaningful aesthetic – or perhaps more accurately, claim that there is no meaningful difference between the decorators' 'aesthetic' and the values that drive their business practices, on one hand, and their sofa-matching consumerism, on the other. Whether this categorization is true is, in part, the subject of this dissertation.

<sup>17</sup> "The designers' claim that they deserve a share of the deal because their advice legitimized the client's purchase is analogous to the dealer's claims that they deserve a share of the artist's studio sales because the gallery connection legitimized the value of the artist's work. In both cases, the claim is that the legitimization of value, and not the direct market search and choice leading to the sale, deserves the financial reward" (Plattner, p. 162). The point is made even more forcefully in the Conclusion: "Dealers claim that the gallery's affiliation give the artist status in the local market, which enables the sale even though the dealer was uninvolved with the specific transaction. Similarly, designers or interior decorators may claim a share of a sale by a gallery directly to a client, even though the designer may never have seen the artwork until it appeared in the client's home. Their logic is that the designer, as aesthetic advisor to the client, legitimizes (and allows to stand) the purchase, even after the fact. Thus dealers are hoist [sic] with their own profit-sharing petards." (*Ibid.*, p. 198)

cooperate with designers, *which could hurt their business*" [emphasis added].<sup>18</sup>

From this and other statements, it is clear that designers constitute a significant part of the sales generated in (even) the avant-garde market of St. Louis, and one that dealers can not afford to ignore; Plattner provides no information about the numbers or kinds or hierarchies of designers in the market, much less their opinions of the moral fiber of dealers. If we are to understand this study as an *economic ethnography*, one wonders what methodological rationale excuses the exclusion of this clearly-influential set of market actors. Moreover, while this specific instance refers to interior design professionals, by and large the term "decorators" is used in the interviews in a much more inclusive and expansive way, meaning anyone who is not recognized as adhering to the accepted norms of the avant-garde value system, but who still buys art in the marketplace, whether for clients or for themselves. Decorators in this second sense are not just a part of the market— in the aggregate they constitute its majority:

Several dealers characterized their buyers as either serious, meaning that they collected art with an aesthetic strategy and an appreciation of art-historical issues, or as decorators, meaning that they needed something to decorate their room, to go with their new couch or carpet. These latter were contemptuously described as "swatch people"; they arrived at the gallery with a sample swatch of upholstery material to make sure the colors matched. All dealers complained that serious collectors were too rare [and one "high end" dealer described his clientele as], "primarily people who are decorating their homes and looking for

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<sup>18</sup> Plattner, p. 162.

something pretty over the couch. That's what our business mostly is, people who come in with swatches.<sup>19</sup>

Avant-garde ideology as proffered by Plattner claims that the role of market forces and activities in the world of high art is intrinsically paradoxical (and irrelevant to the production of meaning), and its adherents go to great lengths to minimize or rationalize its apparent influence and importance; thus, they would see no logical discontinuity in discounting the actions of a majority of market participants whose claim to consideration lies in their (merely) economic stake in the market. But does Plattner's assertion that his study is "ethnographic" (hence delimited by the social boundaries his informants draw) abrogate the "economic" part of the title, and the need for a description of all of the economically-important groups in the marketplace? To the contrary, the ethnographic perspective cries out for a more thorough consideration of the broadly-defined class of "decorators" even more clearly than does the economist's voice, because not only the decorators themselves, but the very idea of "the decorative" pervades Plattner's and many of his informants' discussions

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<sup>19</sup> Plattner., pp. 139-140. The passage cited above in the epigraph appears in the chapter on Collectors and offers another hint at the illogic of ignoring the place of decorators in the market. Even though these "hundreds of decorators, or 'swatch people,'" are at the other extreme from "world-class collectors" who are part of the international art market (*Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.), the fact that the 'sporadic' purchases by individuals are part of *re-decorating* activities suggests multiple purchases over time, and even dime-a-dozen buyers represent a lot of dimes for the dealers who disdain them.

of art, ideology and the marketplace, defining specifically what avant-garde art culture is not.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the fact that “decorative” is proposed as the very antithesis of avant-garde art, and hence an integral structural part of the market, Plattner declines the opportunity to define it in other than the negative terms we would expect from someone personally (but, here, not objectively) immersed in the culture—i.e., “trite or without the consciousness-expanding attributes that high art is supposed to have.”<sup>21</sup> He seems to prefer making bold, generalized assertions about the values and motivations such clearly “non-avant-garde” individuals and groups are presumed to hold, rather than giving the reader specific examples of interviews that illustrate the purported decorative mind-set; in fact, we do not know if he even conducted interviews with designers at all. We are to understand that the meaning of “decorative” is so self-evident—even where it paradoxically intersects with high-art culture—that he need not bother presenting any arguments or evidence to support his claims about “decorative” art or its putative proponents. On the other hand, his explicit definition of avant-

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<sup>20</sup> Plattner’s passage cited in the epigraph of my first chapter bears repeating in its entirety here: “The nominal criterion for high art is some meaningful contribution that advances our cultural vision. The other end of the continuum of art objects is purely decorative work . . . The important distinction is between art that makes a personally valid statement and that which is pure decoration or has practical utility. . . Something that is merely decorative cannot help one to see the world differently and cannot change the appreciation of reality, as high art can for those few with the educated capacity to appreciate it. The long shadow of the impressionists, whose work was considered outrageous in the beginning but now looks comfortably pleasant is additional justification for accepting contemporary work that looks outrageous, and downgrading contemporary work that is pleasant to look at or ‘accessible’ (Plattner, p. 88.)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108, note 14.

garde art and culture is marked by complexity and contradictions (some un-noted), and it seems reasonable to take a few pages here to describe the definition of “high art” which, as Plattner correctly claims, is pervasive in contemporary American culture, though not unchallenged either ideologically or practically.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Practical Avant-Garde*

In stark contrast to the readily-apparent identity and qualities of “decorative” art, the identity and quality of avant-garde art is claimed to have little relation to appearance. In fact, according to Plattner, the nearly-complete opacity of any intrinsic or object-based measure of quality of an artwork is one of the defining features of the avant-garde marketplace (and an aftermath of—depending on who you ask—the rise of the dealer-critic system with the Impressionists, or the more recent diversification and proliferation of concurrent styles commonly called “postmodernism”).<sup>23</sup> This means that the central factors in determinations of the quality of artworks are inescapably-subjective

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<sup>22</sup> As I suggested in the Introduction, “avant-garde” and “high art” are not synonymous, since “high art” museums are filled with artworks that were once considered “cutting edge,” but that have since been thoroughly institutionalized. But Plattner is inexact in his usage of the terms, frequently using “museum quality” as a descriptor of art that fits his definition of quality “avant-garde.”

<sup>23</sup> “This study focuses on ‘museum-quality’ visual artworks. These are most often paintings or sculpture that could conceivably be shown in the contemporary art section of an art museum . . . . In an age of conceptual, minimal, and performance art, it is often unclear what museum-quality high art is supposed to look like. . . . This introduces the third broad theme of this study: the social life of fine-art objects is in large part independent of their objective physical qualities.” (Plattner, p. 4)

perceptions of the motives, attitudes and even work habits of the artists, themselves. The circularity of the argument which defines “museum-quality work” as being that artwork which “might be shown in . . . an art museum” is the pattern for most of the definitions which follow, and the reader may ultimately infer that the definition of “avant-garde art” is, essentially, “art made by avant-garde artists.” The lack of accepted rules for the value of “objective qualities” aside, the author nevertheless is able to articulate in no uncertain terms what the avant-garde ideology requires of artworks and artists. Quoting Charles Simpson, a sociologist who studied New York’s SoHo and described art as “aesthetically successful new imagery [that] pushes the horizons of reality away from us all, expanding civilized consciousness,” Plattner says:

As melodramatic as this may sound to those unconnected to the art world, it is a realistic figure of speech for people involved in fine art. It justifies the hype and high prices, since expanding our cultural capital is as important as providing food and shelter – more important, some would argue, since art gives meaning to material survival. Fine art is similar to religion, then, as an institution that counteracts the crassly commercial search for advancement in a capitalist world. At the same time, these objects of supposedly sublime vision are bought and sold as commodities.

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The core of this definition of art is its capacity to interact in some “expanding” way with the whole of culture, *excepting* the cultural values that

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<sup>24</sup> Plattner, p. 4. Like Halle, Plattner brings in the theories of class and culture Bourdieu developed in reference to European Museums; unlike Halle, he finds them convincing and translatable to the American setting. However, this use of ‘cultural capital’ doesn’t appear to be the same as Bourdieu’s, since Plattner seems to mean a generalized societal repository of value – an art-derived ‘treasury of virtue’, so to speak – which is enriched by the aggregate work of all avant-garde artists, rather than a measure of prestige and acquired expertise which can be parlayed into increased social standing when deployed by individuals in relation to their specific class identity and social position.



govern ordinary economic interaction, which it is expected to transcend. From our position looking back over at least a half-century in which wave after wave of then-contemporary artists sought new media, new venues, new practices by which to protect their ever more intellectualized works from the danger of being rendered mere commodities in the marketplace (or hung over someone's sofa), it may be restating the obvious to say that avant-garde art could be defined as being whatever is *not* the same as ordinary experience—especially economic experience, but expanded to include even the basic patterns of daily life in a consumerist society, informed as they are at every level by the logic of the marketplace.<sup>25</sup> This is why Plattner denies (or at least marginalizes) the importance of any specific art object (for avant-garde artists, at least) and shifts the locus of meaning to the agency and even personality of the artist him- or herself. It is not so important what objects (if any) the artist makes, so long as the artist is professionally dedicated, economically disinterested, and personally committed to working in such a way so as to deny, or at least remain oblivious to, ordinary use values. By doing so, the artist fulfils the defining role of being apart from the world of “crass commercial advancement”:

The art market is a fascinating case in a capitalist, commercial society precisely because economics is *not* supposed to matter to art.

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<sup>25</sup> This is true even of art forms which draw their visual language or content from the very fabric of everyday commercialized life, referring to it ironically, *a la* Pop Art: the irony marks the speaker's rhetorical distance from and implied rejection of the object of the ironic reference, even (perhaps especially) if the speaker is “making hay” (or a commercial success) from the very dynamics he proposes to critique, i.e., the visual saturation of the commodity society, in which images—whether of soup cans or automobile accidents—are themselves endlessly repeated as objects for consumption.

Artists are supposed to make art to advance our vision through their intensely personal expression, not to make money. This means that an artist's oeuvre should have a trajectory, spirit, and an integrity of its own. The challenge to artists is to create work that is personal and unique, with significant aesthetic quality. . . . The hint of a commercial motive controlling the aesthetic decisions of most artists is enough to seriously damage the work's quality for people at the high end of the market. . . . [A] work of fine art must be a sincere expression of the artist's personal aesthetic standards, not merely a clever solution calculated to exploit a market opportunity. Artists, above all people, are expected to maintain their independence and develop their personal style.<sup>26</sup>

The effect is an intentional slippage between the subject of the artist's practice and its object: intensely personal expression of self is both what the artist does/is and what the artist makes. If before we were told that *avant-garde art = what is made by avant-garde artists*, which was further refined to *what the avant-garde artist makes = the artist him- or herself*, here we have arrived at the complete formula that *avant-garde art = the artist him- or herself*. If the paradox of the avant-garde art market is that "sublime vision" is traded as a commodity, avant-garde ideology seeks to resolve the "commodification problem" by abstracting it: the work of art is no longer a physically-consumable object exchanged in the marketplace, it is – via his or her transformative vision – the inalienable artist him- or herself. Because the entire meaning of the avant-garde creative practice

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<sup>26</sup>Plattner, pp. 22-23. This "personal style" is not insignificantly in the artist's *life-style*, as well: "Fine-artists face a deal offered by society: the benefit is their unique status – marginalized yet relatively high compared to their income – and independence, meaning self-definition of their conditions of work and freedom from the normal constraints on social behavior. The cost is poverty (or negligible income from art), with the tiny chance of art-historical and market success." (p. 25) Also, "artists can enjoy these social freedoms, which most other people of their educational and class backgrounds would not be interested in, because the ideology of a 'real' artist is often to sacrifice social niceties and physical comforts in the service of their work. The job of advancing the cultural vision is too important to be deflected by conventional concerns about social respectability." (p. 26).

(the work – or labor – of art) is pegged to the intentions and even the personality of the artist, it is possible to deny that the observable features of the result of that practice (the artwork) have any importance in the establishment of its meaning or value.

To remain within the frame of the avant-garde market (to exist *as art* at all), a work may be judged only as a marker of the artist's pursuit of a personal aesthetic, which is itself judged according to its authenticity (i.e., anti-commercialism). Furthermore, only those individuals, groups, and institutions that recognize these as the sole grounds for evaluation are considered as legitimate participants, only their spaces are deemed appropriate physical contexts in which to carry out that evaluation, and only their actions and evaluations have recognized effect in the field. This effectively circumscribes the boundaries of the field – and ideal market – of avant-garde art to *a*) certified artists whose personality and lifestyle comprise a critique of the consumer-capitalist ethos, *b*) dealers who represent both the artist's and the culture's interests and act as intermediaries between the two, and *c*) collectors, who stand for the small enlightened segment of society and serve as an historically-attuned repository for the culture-expanding works of the artists.

I began my critique of *High Art Down Home* with a discussion of the absence of decorators in Plattner's set of informants to illustrate that what might be seen as a methodological shortcoming, oversight, or even failure, is actually

an ideological stratagem. Whether deployed by Plattner intentionally or not, the omission of a large portion of the objectively-determined “audience” for avant-garde art only makes sense from the avant-garde position noted above, that people who can’t be shown to embrace its ideals are not really a (meaningful) part of its audience at all: they may buy it, but they don’t “get it.”<sup>27</sup> Though Plattner claims to study the paradoxes of avant-garde art (high-culture vs. commerce, valuation without evaluative rules), he in fact looks at only those paradoxes which serve to highlight avant-garde culture’s claimed independence from and reversal of the values of the dominant consumer capitalist culture, while discounting the importance of similar, related contradictions that demonstrate the links between and *interdependence* of the two.

The central contradiction, of course, is that the field of restricted production (avant-garde art) is nevertheless imbedded in (is a sub-field of) the overall fields of cultural production and power in capitalist society, and must appropriate certain forms or patterns of interaction from that wider arena, even though those very patterns seem to counteract art’s claim to be set apart from ordinary commerce. If art’s culture-expanding work is to occur, the artist’s creative self-reference must eventually be interrupted by communication with

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<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the book’s surprising lack of photographs or even careful descriptions of the artworks that are the heart of the art world studied could be seen as a methodological flaw, or perhaps a social scientist’s inattention to the material artifacts of his study, but is actually an ideological artifact in its own right, born of that same central assertion that avant-garde works of art are not reducible to their material forms, nor are their meanings necessarily apparent, but only determined by the intellectual and personal intentions of the artist.

the rest of society, and subjected to patterns of exchange that are informed by the market. In abstract terms, the apparent contradiction between an artwork's value as a culture-expanding utterance and its status as a commodity resides in the necessity that its corporeal form (the object) move from the private site of its origination to the public space of culture in order to convey its meaning. Plattner recognizes this as the central contradiction of avant-garde art when he says, "these objects of supposedly sublime vision are bought and sold as commodities."<sup>28</sup> But though Plattner's appropriate subtlety here is in not-saying the objects *are* commodities, but rather are subject to patterns of exchange *like* commodities, it may be more accurate still to say that artworks are literally the currency of the quasi-spiritual symbolic economy he proposes. This may be the root of Plattner's alternative use of "cultural capital" (noted in footnote 24, above): in this sense, the artworks themselves are *not* commodities, but abstract capital—markers for a symbolic and imminently transportable medium of exchange of cultural value. As abstract as the distinction seems, its very abstraction is all-important for the idea of autonomy of the field of art since it keeps an artwork's material qualities and "practical utility" (which connect it too closely to the world of material consumable commodities) at arm's length from the symbolic meaning of the work (i.e. labor) of art. And if artworks are seen to be the "currency" of the market, then knowing which works are legal tender and

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<sup>28</sup> Plattner, p. 4, also cited in note 24.

which are counterfeits becomes the central problem for evaluating both art and artists.

Now we can see the necessity of screening out actors in the market who do not “know the rules”: as long as only those who know the rules are allowed to play, the work of art (standing for the artist) will pass from artist through dealer to collector, always remaining in its abstracted form as cultural *capital*, but never actually converted to, much less actually consumed as a *commodity*. The artist thus may safely exchange the artwork-as-capital to acquire the material commodities required for living, knowing that its movement into the hands of a bona-fide collector implies that it will remain in the abstracted form of cultural capital (appreciated as the speech of the artist), whose value is increased by continued circulation in the capital markets and cancelled (not unlike a postage stamp) if reduced to its superficial use value (matched to a sofa). By continued circulation (or at least the avoidance of cancellation) a margin of immortality is attained for the artist and work – what Plattner describes as avant-garde artists’ “painting for history.” In the world of avant-garde art, the possibility of this use-value potential (using a rare stamp to post a letter, so to speak) is systematically ignored as beyond the definition of art; instead, only abstract “capital market” exchanges are regarded as significant. Artworks may be subjected to the *patterns* of commodity exchange, but it is really the exchange of purely alienated cultural capital, not commodity exchange itself. By denying the corporality of art works,

the market seeks to prevent the objects from getting loose from the arena of meanings and uses that are considered legitimate. So beneath the apparent contradiction of “vision” traded as a commodity lies a deeper contradiction: the avant-garde economy of signs-not-things denies the logic of ordinary commodities only to replicate the more advanced and alienated dynamics of capitalism.

Nevertheless, much of the complex theoretical structure implicit in the ideology Plattner describes seems to be designed specifically to counter intrusions of and mystify similarities to ordinary market and cultural logic; often the first line of such a defense is to “hide in plain sight” even obvious inconsistencies. That is, when faced with an unavoidable presence of agents or dynamics inimical to the professed value system, avant-garde actors (or their apologists) deny that these people or features constitute a meaningful challenge by consciously and purposefully ignoring them, even to the point of claiming they don’t exist. A fairly passive example comes in Plattner’s chapter on “collectors,” whom he has defined specifically in contrast to “swatch people” and even to occasional buyers of avant-garde art, as those who “focus on involvement in the art world, not merely on art purchases in the short run. . . . By focused collecting and support of the arts, serious collectors can share the culture-expanding status of artists.”<sup>29</sup> In the midst of a discussion of collectors’

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<sup>29</sup> Plattner, pp 166-169. He also makes a point that money does not a *collector* make: “On the other hand, someone who spends twenty thousand dollars on paintings in one year during re-

consideration of the investment or re-sale value of local avant-garde art vs. art made in the New York market, Plattner gives us the following remarkable citation from a high-end dealer:

[These locally produced] things that I sell . . . have no intrinsic value on the market. . . . That's exactly what most of this art is about, it's decorative, it's something to enjoy while you have it, but it's not anything that has any kind of intrinsic monetary value. It's like a table or a couch or your tie, you really can't expect that it will pay off. . . . There is not only no [monetary] appreciation, there is no intrinsic value other than the value one gets, [aesthetic] appreciation, on one's own.<sup>30</sup>

Because Plattner is not discussing "decoration" here, but his central "cultural cringe" paradox – not to mention the ideologically shady area of fixing cultural value in terms of return on one's investment – he simply ignores the fact that this credentialed avant-garde dealer has just explicitly likened art to so mundane a decorative commodity as a necktie. In the next quote the same dealer goes on to clarify that this doesn't make local art any less "good," for much of the investment-quality art he sees is "crap."<sup>31</sup> If Plattner were attentive to this particular paradox (that even "high art" serves a predominantly decorative role – precisely Halle's argument about abstract work), he might have suggested that the dealer was using the terms in a more figurative way, or even merely pointed out the apparent contradiction. But because the distinction between

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decorating, but who leaves all the decisions in the hands of a decorator, is no more interested in their art than they are in their sofa or drapes. They are not collectors by any meaningful standard" (*Ibid.*, p. 166).

<sup>30</sup> Plattner, pp. 175-176.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.



decoration and culture-expanding work is integral to his view of the avant-garde program, it is a safer tactic to ignore these implications entirely.

The slippery notion of “collectors” being qualitatively different rather than quantitatively different from occasional buyers is an inherent weakness in self-consciously anti-commercial avant-garde rhetoric, resulting predictably in inconsistencies like this in Plattner’s defense of it. But it also leads Plattner to his most absurd and proactive instance of the “deny everything” technique – a rather off-handed, wave-of-the-wand dismissal of an entire class of art and art-buyers (bourgeois art?), so that all that remains within the definition of culturally-meaningful art is the work he deems avant-garde: “The vast majority of people who do not relate to contemporary avant-garde work, yet who want something on the walls, buy inexpensive reproductions from frame shops (cf. Halle 1993).”<sup>32</sup> This statement essentially denies as a *meaningful* possibility that the vast majority of artists in St. Louis (the ones he did not interview), even those consciously *not* avant-garde, nevertheless continue to produce works which have a market – at the very least as the “originals” for “frame-shop reproductions.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Plattner, p. 198. Aside from the fact that this is a misrepresentation of Halle’s research, his citation of Halle for the purpose of suggesting that avant-garde art is, in effect, the only culturally meaningful art would seem to fly in the face of Halle’s entire project.

<sup>33</sup> A telling example is one of several artists of whom Plattner says, “they live in a different world” (meaning, in part, they have not been socialized into avant-garde values in M.F.A. programs), but whom he admits to be the majority of those who call themselves artists. “Tammy” is described by Plattner as “a 45-year-old business painter,” and Tammy is everything that to Plattner an avant-garde artist is not: middle aged when she started painting professionally (after a divorce), suburban middle class (she lives in a “fairly new . . . brick ranch-home”), willing to negotiate between “painting for herself and painting for others.” According to Plattner, “her solution is to sell her decorative, abstract works on paper directly to people at [the extensive

Furthermore, it implies that either all those “swatch people” who make up “most of the business” of even high-end dealers have been rehabilitated into the ranks of avant-garde *aficionados*, or all that “lower quality, more decorative art” that dealers must sell in order to carry their “difficult” work has been rehabilitated so that it is now avant-garde. Despite having himself discussed several artists who took “alternate paths” to the avant-garde one he prescribed, Plattner’s claims of uncovering the paradoxes of avant-garde culture’s relationship with the commercialized world are undermined by his unwillingness to consider such contradictions when they threaten the appearance of avant-garde cultural sovereignty.

The central element of my critique of Plattner’s work, then, is that his own implication in the hegemonic ideology he purports to bring to light keeps him from fully exploring the contradictions of the avant-garde marketplace itself, leading him to dismiss the possibility that non-avant-garde art worlds (including those that make use of avant-garde works) may also be paths to the production of significant cultural meaning. Thus, Plattner might have produced an important discussion of the negotiation of meaning of artworks via the differing end-uses proposed by artists and buyers, had such an investigation not been

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national network of] art fairs. . . Tammy makes about one hundred paintings a year and sells eighty to ninety of them. . . . On the other hand, Tammy recognizes the importance of gallery affiliation to establish her legitimacy with buyers. Her work is represented in one of the better St. Louis galleries as well as six others, from Walnut Creek, California, to Coral Gables, Florida” (Plattner, pp. 108-109). The author’s aim may have been to prove the rule by its exception, but he nevertheless suggests that there are significant markets for art not made in self-consciously avant-garde contexts nor rightly categorized as “frame-shop reproductions.”

precluded by the avant-garde focus on the artist as the sole originator of meaning—even in social networks. Rather than acknowledge the obvious (seemingly irrefutable) slippages between the avant-garde field of production and the likewise-pervasive “decorative” worldview (slippages that seem to promise an alternative to what even he, himself, seems to think is a bleak outlook for high-art artists in the hinterlands), Plattner instead contributes to the view that the “invidious distinctions”<sup>34</sup> that mark artworks’ and artists’ places in the hierarchies of standing are the necessary (inescapable?) result of art defined by its opposition to and occasional transcendence of ordinary daily life.

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<sup>34</sup> Plattner, p. 194. “[The] market is structured externally and internally by principles of discrimination, hierarchy, and hegemony. The most important fact to know about any work of art is its standing in the hierarchy of values from museum-quality avant-garde art to frame shop, hobbyist, and craft fair art.”

## CHAPTER III:

### Feminine Diversions

“The doctrine of aesthetic indifference [makes] the epistemological claim that the experiencing self can remain apart from that which is experienced and thereby place oneself optimally to judge. This (voyeuristic) presumption privileges certain judging positions and judgmental activities, while it diminishes and degrades others. Women are typically ranked among the latter.”

– Hilde Hein, “Refining Feminist Theory: Lessons from Aesthetics,” p. 10.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Amateurs*

As Bourdieu has suggested, the field of culture depends upon polar opposites for the vitality of its definitional logic as it applies not only to people, but also to the spaces where the work of competing ideologies is done. This chapter discusses the historical context behind the divorce of art and the home as part of the gendering of art production as a predominantly masculine pursuit, beginning with the identification of the group posited to be the very antithesis of the members of today’s avant-garde. Plattner gives a hint of who fulfills this role in his cursory description of the much-maligned “swatch-people” and their decorative intrusions into avant-garde gallery spaces, but considering the

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<sup>1</sup> Hein’s essay is the first in the volume she edited with Carolyn Korsmeyer: *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); pp. 3-13.

premium that this scheme places on creative agency, the critical difference must be expressed in terms of the production of artworks, rather than merely their distribution or consumption.<sup>2</sup> Precisely fitting this bill are the ranks of amateurs who make up the membership of such groups as the Saint Louis Artists Guild, which Plattner describes as,

a group of predominantly suburban, middle-class, middle-aged hobbyist artists. . . . More professionalized artists (who tend to have M.F.A.'s) disdain the Guild as composed of older women who began painting after their children left home, who continually take workshops but never make a strong commitment as professionals. In aesthetic quality, Guild art takes no risks, but explores familiar, decorative themes and forms.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that while “professionalism” is claimed to be the central distinguishing factor between avant-garde artists and amateurs (“The difference lies primarily in their commitment of time and willingness to grapple with the challenging issues of personal creativity in their work, and perhaps secondarily in their ability, originality, and sophistication.”<sup>4</sup>), “amateur” is not given in isolation but as part of a cluster of linked terms that draw attention to the context of art-making more than to the actual method or commitment to art-making itself: *amateur*, *decorative*, *suburban* and *woman* are linked almost to the point of conflation. That is to say, it is not just the lack of dedication that sets

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<sup>2</sup> I will begin by returning once more to Stuart Plattner’s description of the Saint Louis market because it is “provincial” and recent, but also because he so eloquently expresses the biases of those who define art by its autonomy and disinterestedness.

<sup>3</sup> Plattner, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

amateurs at the opposite end of the art spectrum from avant-garde artists, it is amateurs' adherence to a value system that puts art somewhere other than at the top of the hierarchy of claims on an individual's time and energy – and notably below such things as a spouse's career or child-rearing – or links it to the spaces in which those other activities occur. So in the case of "Gertrude" (Plattner's single interview with a painter of this variety, apparently chosen because she presented a level of commitment and connection to the actual market unusual for her type), repetition of the term "housewife" (three times in the first paragraph alone) and "mother" (twice), along with "suburban," indicate to the reader a combination of material affluence and traditional "middle class" values and roles that make the explicit addition of "decorative" and "amateur" superfluous. In shorthand, the antithesis of *avant-garde* is embodied in a contemporary (so, all-the-more *retardaire*) *bourgeois femininity*:

She had always been part of the large group of people, mainly suburban housewives, who take courses and workshops in art. They maintain their interest as a hobby, but they rarely have the self-confidence and commitment to carve significant amounts of time out of their lives to devote to art. Gertrude was an active mother, housewife, and church member and had always thought of her time making art as stolen from her responsibilities towards others.<sup>5</sup>

Plattner's emphasis on taking classes and workshops also dovetails nicely with White's statement that, "in today's view, the amateur/professional

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<sup>5</sup> White, p. 113.

boundary is often between the role of teacher and the role of student.”<sup>6</sup> But notice also that Plattner’s “carving time out of their lives” posits a clear separation between art and middle-class home life, and is consistent with the avant-garde idea of art as being necessarily autonomous from these other responsibilities, rather than integrated with (much less expressive of) them. He includes the fact that “Gertrude” had early plans to become an artist, but we are left to assume that she did not follow that path because she chose to pursue a “conventional” life, instead – a decision that marks even subsequent attempts to make art with the taint of suburban domesticity. Plattner’s too-easy dismissal of women like Gertrude who did not early decide to build professional careers as artists neglects longstanding cultural constraints on women’s roles in the arts, not to mention practical constraints literally born of the additional roles and responsibilities of motherhood. And if Plattner attributes suburban housewives’ amateurism to a lack of commitment or lack of confidence alone, then applicable to Plattner as well as White is Diana Crane’s criticism that “[White’s *Careers and Creativity*] focuses on interactions between the artist and his (seldom her) social and cultural environment and relationships between social identities and the arts. . . . The fact that opportunities for artistic careers have generally been much less available to women than to men is ignored.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> White, p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> Crane, p. 1363. Plattner does not seem to connect the attrition of graduate school-trained women artists from the professional ranks with the still more curtailed “careers” of the greater

White's formulation of artistic legitimacy appears to be at least slightly more forgiving of women who have interrupted or delayed professional careers, in that while he mentions that the teacher/student boundary is a common marker for professionalism, he also introduces the idea of the "part-time professional" to account for the many arts that lack the institutional or market structures of support and distribution to provide a living for most artists practicing them; this lack leads to doubts for the artists about the possibility of career narratives, even though "most artists wish to be committed as professional artists." But again, what he does not acknowledge is that the lack of "serious" support is more profound for some groups than others, and that the ideology he tacitly endorses institutionalizes some of that lack of support as it pertains to bourgeois women, especially. On the other hand – and unlike Plattner – White seems to recognize that art arising out and expressive of the experiences of bourgeois life might pose a challenge to avant-garde cultural authority, but on account of the sheer numbers of its potential practitioners and the possible

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number of women who were not able (or chose not) to go even that far in their training, despite the fact that the difference between at least some of the individuals in each group may come down to *when* in their lives those "other commitments" intruded into the women's art-professional ambitions. More importantly, whether their retreat from the avant-garde lifestyle comes before or after academic training, what all these women artists (and their creative productions) share is the indelible stain of that retreat from avant-garde "professionalism" and towards the values of un-exalted (domestic) daily life, even if they later return to the craft of art (or to continued instruction) or seek a career in an "art-related" field such as decoration. Indeed, we have already seen that Plattner posits "professionalism" as a defining feature of "artist" status, and so rules out suburban women on account of their lack of professionalism and lack of commitment to their art (dilettantes), but also rules out decorators on *account* of their professionalism (in his view) misapplied.



political might of suburbia, rather than because he acknowledges that the expression of a bourgeois vision could be a legitimate or sustainable alternative aesthetic to that of the avant-garde. Thus he states that the amateur/professional boundary has its most important effect in the “quandary of noncommercial support” for the arts, as he fears that “populist pressures may appear and increase to the point where the importance of distinguishing professional from amateur is disdained in favor of goals of self-expression, for groups as well as individuals. . . . Amateur creativity can be great in individual artworks, but it cannot sustain genre or, probably, style. These are desperate matters.”<sup>8</sup>

To White they are desperate matters, indeed, because he sees in them the possibility of political pressure (that is, “external” pressure that challenges the autonomy of art) being applied to shift economic support and – worse – a debased or vulgarized cultural valorization from those expressions of identity that show “narrative creativity and genius” to expressions of those identities which are judged (by White) to be irrelevant to the central stories being told in and of our contemporary culture. Yet White’s desperation may be mitigated, the reader imagines, so long as “non-commercial” (i.e. un-market-corrupted) support continues to be apportioned on the basis of autonomous measures of creativity and “quality,” rather than according to sheer political might in the service of populist self-expression, since he clearly believes that instances of

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<sup>8</sup> White, p. 143-145.

style-sustaining creativity could not arise more than occasionally from among the ranks of amateurs.<sup>9</sup> And here is where his definition of “part-time professional” enables White, like Plattner, to make a fine distinction between culturally-important artists and superfluous amateurs based not on the obvious measure of time committed to the perfection of craft (much less objective qualities of an artwork) but on the subjective appraisal of commitment to the mind-set (and possibly life-style) of “the artist.”

White’s theory and Plattner’s practice clearly overlap in their citation of professionalism as a measure of artistic seriousness, but the linkage between White’s explanation of art as about “identities” and Plattner’s description of it as about “personally valid statements” is even more telling of the ideology that sets bourgeois women as the antithesis of significant art, since both include an implicit hierarchy of which statements and which identities are worthy of consideration. In White’s terms, the identities and experiences of these women are assumed to be irrelevant to the “important narratives of our time.” And while Plattner defines art as consisting of “meaningful personal-” or “personally valid statements,” an attentive reader will surely come to the conclusion (as the avant-garde for whom the author seems to speak clearly have) that those

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<sup>9</sup> At least White’s “desperation” is a tacit admission that the ideologies of art are, in fact, contested; what’s more, I think he is not far off in his assessment of a rising challenge to avant-garde orthodoxy in the realm of publicly-supported art. A point to which I will return in my conclusion, however, is that this challenge is not strictly a “bourgeois” or reactionary/populist one, but one born of a demographically-driven commingling of avant-garde and bourgeois ideals in an economy ever more focused on intellectual labor and professional services.

“persons” who may be defined by such terms as “suburban,” “amateur,” “middle-class” or “middle-aged woman” must be almost *a priori* not-valid, and their statements similarly not-meaningful.

### *The Feminine Sphere*

In this first part of my dissertation I have been focusing attention on the structural as well as ideological opposition of the avant-garde to a heretofore ill-defined and little-studied bourgeois art, seeking in the end to draw attention to those aspects of domestic painting that make it a likely candidate for the bourgeois art role (or at least an instance of it) and, hence, account for its invisibility in critical discourse. Of such aspects, two that have leapt to the fore are the integration of this art with the spaces of the bourgeois home, on one hand, and the predominance of women throughout the range of market roles, on the other. I have also already discussed that *bourgeois* itself has come to represent all that autonomous avant-garde art is not, principally through the idea that art should be (and should be made) in a sphere apart from the main consumer capitalist culture, and eschewing the forms, transactions, and spaces of that culture as much as possible, especially that primary site of both consumption and class reproduction, the private bourgeois home.

That the particular set(s) of bourgeois women whom I have been highlighting in the last few pages are excluded from the purview of legitimate art

has its basis in part, then, on their failure to maintain art's key distance from the mundane aspects of their daily lives. Similarly, the domestic spaces from which many of the presumed "amateurs" work and for which art is sometimes sought as decoration also succumb to the infection of "use values" vis-à-vis art. But here it is critical to point out that the connection between the categories of "bourgeois woman" and "the bourgeois home" – both standing antithetically to "serious art" – is deeper and more organic than their sharing a superficial quotidian contamination. In historical terms, bourgeois domesticity and bourgeois femininity are inseparable and mutually defining, but also critical to bourgeois culture as a whole, and hence to the modern concepts of art and the personality of the artist, even as these latter two have more recently been conceptualized precisely as against all things bourgeois, and all the more against all things femininely domestic.

In calling attention to longstanding structural (no less ideological) constraints on women in the arts, therefore, Diana Crane's review of White cited above serves as a bridge to the work of other scholars besides herself who are similarly attentive to questions of social formations and power relations in general, but who have specifically set out to explicate the ways in which gender categories including "feminine" have been instrumental in the construction of bourgeois identity on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as modern, Modernist, and avant-garde versions of the artist, even beyond those cultural forms most

apparently specific to the production and consumption of artworks. This is the last major strain of scholarship that informs my interrogation of the field of art-writing, exemplified by Griselda Pollock's *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. The arguments that I will discuss in the next few pages are, of course, but one part of the substantial body of published academic writing examining women's place in art and women's place in the middle-class home, much of which is pertinent to my understanding of the connection of bourgeois women with contemporary domesticity; but I will frame this part of my argument with Pollock's work because she has a particular attentiveness not only to the class aspects of gender constructions under modernist ideology, but also and especially to how pictorial strategies and other attributes of specific artworks can be linked to ideological work, features that have proved helpful in understanding how to "read" contemporary domestic paintings.<sup>10</sup>

Especially in the first two chapters of her book, Pollock lays out a Marxist feminist argument that class analysis must be inseparably linked with the

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<sup>10</sup> Thus I will not here recount the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American doctrine of "separate spheres" or its various permutations and fractures leading up to the particular bifurcation of bourgeois life into public and private worlds that was evident by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in both America and Europe, or the various ways women (individuals or groups) have sought to work in, around, and through such distinctions to make a place for themselves in art. Among very recent work, Laura Prieto's *At Home in the Studio, the Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) does an admirable job of tracing both stories, giving a particularly clear account of how emergent modernism's emphasis on individual genius effectively undermined the attempts of women's groups to seek legitimacy in art through professionalization rather than older forms of separatist associationism, while nevertheless making it possible for individual women to participate in the mainstream of art to the extent that they adopted the various attitudes, postures and lifestyles of the avant-garde (men).

interrogation of gender categories, and warns that class mythologies inscribed in/by art have concrete effects in the lives lived under their sway, saying that “[a]rt is constitutive of ideology; it is not merely an illustration of it. It is one of the social practices through which particular views of the world, definitions and identities for us to live are constructed, reproduced, and even redefined.”<sup>11</sup> Like Bourdieu, Pollock sees writing *about* art (both contemporary criticism and the later practices of art historians) as part of the process of art-making, but argues more pointedly that art-making is, itself, both explicitly gendered and critical to the construction of the bourgeois individual: “We should not . . . underestimate the effective significance of [art history’s] definitions of art and artist to bourgeois ideology. The central figure of art historical discourse is the artist, who is presented as an ineffable ideal which complements the bourgeois myths of the universal, classless Man (sic).”<sup>12</sup> Thus according to Pollock, the lack of attention to women in traditional art-historical texts is not just evidence of the historical

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<sup>11</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988) p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20 The “(sic)” is Pollock’s, calling attention to the gendered “Man.” She is more explicit about the structural role of women’s art a few pages later: “Although women artists are treated by modern art history negatively, that is, ignored, omitted or when mentioned at all, derogated, women artists and the art they produced nonetheless play a structural role in the discourse of art history. In fact, to discover the history of women and art at all means accounting for the way art history is written. To expose its underlying assumptions, its prejudices and silences, is to reveal that the negative way in which women artists are recorded and dismissed is nevertheless crucial to the concepts of art and artists created by art history,” (*Ibid.*, p. 24). This description is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s account of “objective structures of the field of production [that] give rise to categories of perception which structure the perception and appreciation of its products. This explains how antithetical couples – of persons . . . or institutions, newspapers . . . theatres (right-bank/left-bank, private/subsidized), galleries, publishers, reviews, couturiers, etc. [Pollock would add “genders”] – can function as classificatory schemes, which exist and signify only in their mutual relations, and serve as landmarks or beacons.” [Bourdieu (1993), p. 95.]

constraints on artistic careers for women. Instead, this profound silence exists because the conception of Modernist art and the Modernist artist were built upon and represented the class and *gender*-specific experiences of bourgeois men – epitomized by the character of the *flâneur* – who moved and *looked* freely within and across the social spaces of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris, using the women of various classes to whom they had social, visual, and physical access as markers for this very mobility.<sup>13</sup>

Granted to modern bourgeois men in the new Paris, the freedom to “see” (gaze, look, visually *consume*) without reciprocally “being seen” was in sharp contrast to the constraints placed on the wives and daughters of such men; bourgeois women were confined (socially, visually, physically) to domestic settings and certain “protected” public spaces and situations, lest they see things (including certain women of other classes, such as prostitutes) or *be themselves seen* in ways which would call into question their own respectability, their very womanhood. Thus, it was not just historically new (or newly-important) contexts for “acts of seeing” that helped define the experience of modernity, and which were re-presented to viewers then and now in and through Modernist artworks; it was “acts of seeing *women*” that helped define what it was to be a

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<sup>13</sup> Of course Pollock herself draws upon the writings of other scholars, especially feminist theorists of both art and culture [among other texts, Linda Nochlin’s seminal article “Why have there been no Great Women Artists?” is cited, Janet Wolff’s *The Social Production of Art* (1981) also figures prominently, as does the work of feminist artist/writer Mary Kelly, along with insights from semiotic and psychoanalytic literary theory], but also Marx himself and Raymond Williams’ *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980).]

“modern (bourgeois) *man*,” re-presented to viewers then and now in and through artworks. Conversely, it was protocols for being seen (and not seen) – also expressed and re-presented in artworks – that helped encode what it was to be a bourgeois woman. And just as the archetypal male artistic “eye” sought its visual quarry in the “spaces of freedom” associated with public leisure, recreation and spectacle, a respectable bourgeois woman (the very opposite of *artist*) sought refuge in the private realm of the home, “the inside domain of the known and constrained personality.” Pollock argues, in other words, that understanding art in the Modernist age is impossible without understanding the opposite categories of *masculine* and *feminine* as they were defined and lived out within the context of bourgeois class identity, since the very idea of the Modernist “flâneur/artist,”

is articulated across the twin ideological formations of modern bourgeois society – the splitting of private and public with its double freedom for men in the public space, and the pre-eminence of a detached observing gaze, whose possession and power is never questioned as its basis in the hierarchy of the sexes is never acknowledged. For as Janet Wolff has recently argued, there is no female equivalent of the quintessential masculine figure, the flâneur; there is not and could not be a female flâneuse. . . . [Women] were never positioned as the normal occupants of the public realm. They did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize or watch. . . . [Instead] they are positioned as the *object* of the flâneur’s gaze.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pollock, p. 71. Here Pollock, drawing upon feminist criticism from film studies and psychoanalysis to literary criticism and semiotics, offers a specific corrective to the work of T. J. Clark, whose “mighty but flawed” argument in *The Painting of Modern Life* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984) explicated the central role of the flâneur in the spaces of public leisure within the production of Modernism. Pollock argues that Clark nevertheless naturalized the masculine



What Pollock provides is more than a simple reiteration of the history of the home as the women's sphere, or even a connection of that history to art; instead, her argument demonstrates that the very idea of Modernist, avant-garde art was conceived in terms that pushed it towards a public world of symbolic exchange (that is, primarily of ideas rather than material goods, though Modernism was inextricable from the expanding market for paintings), and out and away from the confines of home and the views and purviews of women. "Exchange" is a key term here, because Pollock goes further in establishing the identity of women in terms of their usefulness as markers of ideological commerce:

Woman as a category is a product of a network of relationships created in and through [the] exchanges of females as mothers, daughters, wives. The meaning of the term is also relative to all other terms in the social system. What woman means is composed of the positions in which female persons are placed, as mother, wife, daughter or sister, in relationship to a concurrent production of man as a category in positions such as father, son, husband, brother. Man, however, is positioned as exchanger, *woman as a sign of the exchange as well as its object* [emphasis added].<sup>15</sup>

Pollock's description of women under the logic of bourgeois Modernism as media of exchange rather than and *as opposed to* exchangers has clear commonalities with the identity/role of artworks under the contemporary avant-garde scheme (as described above in my discussion of Plattner) in which the art

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bourgeois eye as the lens through which even art historians should view the social settings in which the paintings of Manet and his followers emerged.

<sup>15</sup> Pollock, p. 31.

object functions primarily as a marker for the work of being an artist. Under both models, it is the act of symbolic/ideological exchange (and, *ergo*, control) that is privileged and glorified, while the thing exchanged has only nominal value in and of itself, except that it points back to the free-floating autonomy and control of the exchanger. In this, Pollock echoes Lynda Nead and others who have argued that the female body itself—and especially the nude female body—literally “figures” so strongly in the history of Western art because she stands symbolically for those areas of experience (history, nature, human passion) over which men in patriarchal society have most vigorously sought physical and ideological control, and which they most sought to commodify.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the difficulty with the idea of a “bourgeois woman artist,” is that both “woman” and “art” are to be understood as objects (not subjects) dependent for their culturally-significant meanings on being kept in play as signs amidst the free exchange of similar signs. Allowed to settle down and out of such play, out of the various “master-narratives” of their times, both art and bourgeois woman lose their vibrancy and historical trajectory, and attention must inevitably revert to their surface qualities, physical location within domestic spaces and—ultimately—their *decorative* function.

Under this formulation, a bourgeois woman is effectively denied the role of artist—of exchanger—unless she finds a strategy to solve the conundrum of

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<sup>16</sup> Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992).

exchanging *herself* as a sign/object-of-exchange in order to signify her place as an exchanger of signs. Pollock's third chapter proposes that the women Impressionists Cassatt and Morisot found precisely such a strategy in their "rearticulation of traditional space so that it cease[d] to function primarily as the space of sight for a mastering gaze, but [became] the locus of relationships."<sup>17</sup> By evoking a different experience of domestic and other feminine space, these artists represented themselves *from* within and *as* within the confines of their class identity, of bourgeois femininity, yet "to different purposes" than they would be (in fact were) represented by their male counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

A point I will come back to at the end of this chapter is that Pollock's work offers a strategy with which to analyze the representations produced in the domestic painting market, and suggests the possibility that this "decorative" milieu nurtures a similar overlapping of artworks and lived gender/class positionalities, is itself a hybrid marketplace of signs and material objects in which paintings embody the spatial-relational navigations charted by their creators/consumers. But Pollock's recovery of the essential element of

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<sup>17</sup> Pollock, p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Pollock's point is not that these artists somehow transcended their identities as bourgeois women, but that their working as artists constituted an active and not-inconsequential engagement with the ideology in which that identity was constantly formed and reformed: "By stressing the working process—both as manufacture and signification—as the site of the inscription of sexual difference I am wanting to emphasize the active part of cultural practices in producing the social relations and regulations of femininity. They can also conceivably be a place for some qualification or disruption of them. . . There is no doubt that femininity is an oppressive condition yet women live it to different purposes and feminist analyses are currently concerned to explore not only its limits but the concrete ways women negotiate and refashion that position to alter its meanings (*Ibid.*, p. 84)"

Modernist ideology that literally envisions feminine bourgeois women as a peculiar sort of cultural capital at best, and at worst merely-decorative commodities, also locates one link between the dismissal of today's bourgeois women artists as producers of meaning and the denial that spaces of the private home can be locations in which significant (i.e., *public* and *advancing*) cultural meanings can be made. This link is an essential element in the project of this chapter (understanding how the categories of contemporary art history and art culture preclude taking domestic painting seriously), and wittingly or unwittingly, writers like Plattner and White simultaneously repeat and obscure this essential part of Modernist/avant-garde ideology when they reject also the possibilities of culturally meaningful work emerging from or for the context of suburban homes, from the brushes of bourgeois housewives.

### *Contested Spaces*

Despite the argument that our modern sense of art and, broadly, visual culture in the West has been coded in specifically masculine terms while the spaces of the private home are primarily coded as feminine, these codings of the masculine-public/feminine-private were neither monolithic nor impregnable, especially given their intersection with ambivalent attitudes towards economic – rather than symbolic – commerce. Part of the transformation of the French art market from one of patronage mediated by the academic Salon to what has come

to be called the “dealer-critic system,” and coinciding with the development of Modernist aesthetics, were new display practices that linked the exhibition of artworks with the spaces and decorative practices of bourgeois domesticity, even re-appropriating the private homes of artists and their supporters as avant-garde exhibition sites – the first “home shows.” Sites of various remoteness from the all-too-public Salon came to mark subtleties in the boundaries between public and private, which, in Martha Ward’s words,

served to create finely graduated nuances of refinement, [so that] the ideal private exhibition came to be represented as a haven for aesthetic appreciation that was removed from the crass commerce of the art market, . . . Regardless of the fact that the purpose of shows was to sell works or introduce artists to patrons, creating a non-commercial ambiance was important. . . . [However], the distinction between public and private proved to be chronically unstable and required constant renegotiation with the actual conditions of artistic production and consumption.<sup>19</sup>

Given the gendered associations of art and the domestic sphere I have already discussed, it should not be surprising that this refitting of the feminine sphere for the purposes of avant-garde art was short-lived, even if some of the display practices of the Impressionists and other Modernist artists (notably Whistler) have continued to have echoes in contemporary exhibitions. As Nancy Troy points out, by the turn of the century, Cubists Picasso and Braque and their

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<sup>19</sup> Martha Ward, “Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions,” in *Art Bulletin* 73:4 (1991), p. 599. In this new market and its new spaces, small easel paintings (conveniently sized for the homes of their affluent bourgeois peers) vied with larger Salon-sized works for importance within the artist’s *oeuvre*, but displayed in a quasi-private setting, each also presented a dilemma as to whether it should be “evaluated as an autonomous object addressing the public or as a potentially decorative complement to a domestic space” (*Ibid.*, p. 600).

dealers had mounted an explicit attack on such feminized display practices, even as they sought to make markets for their own works by appealing to a “manly” version of domestic display.<sup>20</sup> But more than just a restatement of the spatial boundaries equated with the dichotomy between artist/man and art/woman, this Post-Impressionists re-thinking of the appropriateness of equating “private” with anti-commercialism and elevated appreciation was the result of the gender-loaded synergy between the barely-suppressed identification of artworks in these private settings as consumer goods with the form of commerce that was most generally visible in the private parlor, and which was also regarded as particularly feminine – e.g., *shopping*. It was within this brew of terms and oppositions that the negative connotations of “decorative” began to hold sway. Troy makes precisely this argument, connecting the dots between domesticity,

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<sup>20</sup> “[Dealer Daniel-Henry] Kahnweiler’s gallery was installed in a manner that marked it as a masculine space. Purposefully distinguishing his gallery from the venues of the officially sanctioned salons as well as the ornately furnished, palm-bedecked interiors of other dealers, Kahnweiler used plain sackcloth on the walls to render his as an ostentatiously undecorated space.” [Nancy J. Troy, “Domesticity, Decoration, and Consumer Culture: Selling Art and Design in Pre-World War I France,” in Reed, Christopher, ed. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modernist Art and Architecture* (1996): pp. 121]. Troy’s essay is one of seventeen in an important (if seldom cited) collection of essays expanded from a panel discussion at the College Art Association in 1993. *Not At Home* includes several helpful chapters on aspects of this subject from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to Pop artists of the 1960s and 70s, many specifically addressing the gender politics of the equation of domesticity with decoration and what has been described as bourgeois femininity. Despite the skepticism expressed throughout the volume about Modernist cultural claims, the concluding essay by editor Reed and Sharon Harr nevertheless expresses a familiar avant-garde distrust (and hope of “moving beyond”) most elements of bourgeois culture as they pertain to homes and art, especially such cherished notions as normative heterosexuality and “traditional” family structure. In other words, there is certainly no call here for a recovery of “bourgeois domesticity,” much less room for artworks that might emerge from it, both of which would fall under the authors’ rubric of a “reactionary post-modernism.”

the “impotence” and “sensual satisfaction” of decoration and the emblem of “feminized arena of consumption,” the department store:

Decoration was gendered feminine not simply because it was sometimes produced by women and often associated with the female sphere of the domestic environment but also, and perhaps more importantly, because it was tied up in the equally feminized realm of consumer culture.<sup>21</sup>

Yet if the Impressionists’ and Post-Impressionists’ private exhibitions draw attention to the problematics of art, domesticity and their gendered associations in France, the slippage between these categories was at least as acute in America, where male artists had to make their way between the Scylla of feminized cultural spaces (and the idea that “culture” itself was “feminine”), and the Charybdis of commerce, the latter of which was generally (and adamantly) argued as being incompatible with the high aims of art. Sarah Burns has said that “the antipathy between art, culture, and the feminine on one hand and business, commerce, and masculinity on the other [was] clearly drawn. Art was something that could only be tainted by commerce, its sole hope of redemption being to secure a position remote from the marketplace, which automatically distanced it from the world of nominally masculine affairs.” For American

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<sup>21</sup> Troy, pp. 116-117. The author even dates the displacement of decoration from the realm of high art as occurring between 1890 and 1914, saying that “the domestic settings that had previously functioned as aestheticized spaces deemed appropriate for the presentation of fine and decorative art themselves became associated with commerce. As a result, the private setting modeled on the home no longer functioned unproblematically as a protected site where art could escape the taint of commerce” (*Ibid.*, p. 113).

artists, then, the ability to “move between the studio environment and the masculine world of the clubs and other venues, where connections could be cultivated and deals struck” – in short, to play the flâneur – was even more critical than it was for their Parisian counterparts.<sup>22</sup> The visual logic and gender politics that defined “artist” by his deployment of the flâneur’s gaze allowed male American artists to engage in and with the domestic scene, so long as the engagement meant mastery of both the space and its inhabitants. Conversely, the danger to the male artist’s reputation came in *not* asserting such control strongly enough to avoid being, himself, associated with feminized scene of the bourgeois home, since being associated with domestic space meant not only being associated with a womanly “culture,” but – as in Europe – with a feminized and passive form of commodity consumption that marked both what bourgeois women did (shop for bibelots at department stores) and what was done to them (visual consumption) – precisely the combination of femininity, domesticity and superficiality that came to be expressed by the term “decorative.” Nevertheless, though the rhetoric of their art would increasingly separate it from the domestic context, establishing decoration as the antithesis of the progressive, un-commodified, and *masculine* aims of their art, for a while, at

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art & Culture in Gilded Age America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996): p. 160 (both citations).



least, American artists and architects at the forefront of Modernism saw the decoration of interiors as a logical extension of their control over all things visual.

In her chapter of *Not at Home*, Linda Docherty discusses a slightly different twist to the ambivalence expressed (and pictured) by male American artists towards the domestic sphere, expressions she also links to the simultaneous defense of artists' high (non-commercial) ideals and presumed masculinity in the face of worries and public/critical commentary about the outfitting (which is not to say decoration) of their professional studios, "where collections of pictures, props, and bric-a-brac resembled department store displays." Docherty notes that such exuberant studio arrangements became a draw in and of themselves for the women who provided the bulk of artists' business, yet they also undermined artists' claims to be remote from commerce – and a particularly "frivolous" and *decorative* form of commerce, at that. She continues, saying that "while resisting domination by 'the ever busy and tidy housewife,' male painters self-consciously deployed domestic subject matter to distinguish their artistic enterprise from the crass materialism of the age. Through pictorial colonization of the female sphere, they laid imperialistic claim to the most favorable and desirable aspect of modern American life."<sup>23</sup> But she

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<sup>23</sup> Docherty, "Model-Families: the Domesticated Studio Pictures of William Merritt Chase and Edmund C. Tarbell," in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (1996): p. 48. The height of this "colonization" of domestic space by male artists came during the Aesthetic/ Arts & Crafts movement(s), and in this as in all things related to arts in the period, class and gender were intimately connected through sometimes-competing, sometimes-

also suggests that the paintings were not entirely successful at controlling the uncertainties about gender and space they sought to picture, and thus, master. On the other hand, during this intermediate period James McNeill Whistler was the prime example not only of the importance of a theatrical assertiveness of an anti-commercial masculinity (Sarah Burns recounts his refusals to surrender his paintings to those who had “merely” paid for them), but of the ability of modernist ideology – of the abstracting, objectifying gaze – to elevate the mundane (even the domestically-tainted) to the realm of the ethereal, of the spiritual, of *art*, while sublimating or deflecting the commodity aspects of both paintings and the bourgeois interiors in which they hung. As Burns observes,

It was the decorative that raised Whistler to a higher plane than [William Merritt] Chase could ever hope to attain. It signaled the presence of ideal and poetic meanings that were literally embedded in design and color, rather than traditional symbol-making or narrative devices. In the late nineteenth century, *decorative* and *decoration* had a number of overlapping connotations, some more literal than others [emphasis original].<sup>24</sup>

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complementary ideologies. Appeals to anti-modern craftsmanship ideals linked the “manly” and authentic traditions of manufacturing trades with what were considered the “lesser,” domestic, (feminine) arts of textiles and ceramics, appropriating them as appropriate fields of masculine endeavor, while simultaneously offering an alternative to the cheap, mass-produced commodities with which women (so it went) might otherwise be inclined to fill their houses. (See Doreen Bolger Burke, et al. *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: MMA/Rizzoli, 1986).) There flowed forth, too, a wealth of advice literature for the edification of the bourgeois housewife, encouraging her to take an active role in the artful (and virtuous) decoration of her home, and even in the manufacture of objects of beauty to be used there. But while the elevation of domestic objects to the status of art persisted for a while, this reform-minded (and more gender- and class-inclusive) strain of thought eventually fell before what came to be the primary narratives of modern art, and the strict separation of artworks from objects of daily life (much less commercially produced and popularly purveyed trinkets) became the norm in “high-art.”

<sup>24</sup>Burns, p. 69.

Still, as a contrast to a more strict interpretation of art as an ideologically masculine category, Burns gives a particularly nuanced reading of what were actually the ever-vacillating gender politics surrounding the person and profession of the artist in American culture in the Gilded Age; and her description suggests some circumspection is necessary in taking even Pollock's account of the "maleness" of art on its face, especially in the American context. The struggle over whether men or women ought control the arrangement of the domestic space notwithstanding, the coding of art work as masculine was not without resistance from well-established traditions associating art with aristocratic (and French) effeminacy and decadence, and in the context of shifting sexual reputations of American male artists, Burns presents some of artists' defenses of their field against women interlopers as defenses of their own professional masculinity. But where her analysis jibes with Pollock's account is in her attribution of a central role for the rhetoric of control (i.e., the free-floating but mastering eye/I) in artists' self-presentations, especially when they colonized cultural areas – like decoration of interior spaces – which were associated with women. Again, Whistler epitomized the connection between the male artist's (necessary) assertion of the "inherent" masculinity of artistic endeavor and the projection of his identity into and onto both abstract and social spaces:

While changing fashions determined to some extent what passed for masculine style, the question of masculine control was central regardless of differing looks. Whistler could express as much authority with pure space as Chase could with opulent clutter. . . Just as Whistler devised the tasteful emptiness of his paintings, he originated, produced, and controlled the elegant nothingness of his domestic habitat. He was commander of his environment, not victim of it.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of preventing oneself from being a “victim” (or passive inhabitant) of the domestic environment by exerting symbolic control over its visible surfaces brings me back finally to art-writing’s assumptions about contemporary bourgeois domesticity and to Pollock’s reading of the works of Cassatt and Morisot. Pollock makes the case that these women Impressionists also used pictorial strategies related to their own specific place in gendered class culture, but in a way that was not “passive,” but that allowed for some “qualification or disruption” as well as “expression” of the position of “bourgeois woman,” even as (because) “their pictures . . . reciprocally affected the painters themselves as they found, through the making of their images, their world represented back to them.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, even in the midst of a repressive gender code that was being further amended to include a constituent purposeless commodity consumption called “decoration,” bourgeois women made “meaningful personal statements.” Moreover, Pollock implies that some of

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<sup>25</sup>Burns, p. 169. On the subject of Whistler’s insistence on aesthetic control of domestic as well as exhibition spaces, see David Park Curry, “Total Control: Whistler at an Exhibition,” in Ruth E. Fine, ed., *James McNeill Whistler: A Reexamination*, vol. 19 of *Studies in the History of Art* (1987).

<sup>26</sup> Pollock, p. 82.

the women pictured in the paintings (those shown as equals sharing with the artists the experiences and territory of bourgeois femininity) might also recognize not only themselves but their common conditions, as well – no less (though differently) than did Cassatt or Morisot. This dynamic of reciprocity, reflexivity, and heightened awareness-of-self by means of a representation that is itself, therefore, appreciated for more than its superficial object or commodity value (much less only as decoration) is precisely the kind of ongoing interaction with the material world that other traditions besides avant-garde Modernism have identified as “aesthetic experience.”<sup>27</sup>

I will contend that it is no great leap to expect that bourgeois women at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite their systematic exclusion from serious consideration in reference to avant-garde art, might also engage with (which is not necessarily to say *resist*) their class and gender identities in the spaces in which those identities are lived, through the production and consumption of artworks. The problem with the very idea of the “merely decorative” as expressed not only in historical works but by those charged with helping us understand contemporary art contexts, is that it denies the possibility of the sort of reflexivity mentioned above; the assumption is not only that the people in

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<sup>27</sup> See Zolberg’s discussion of Jeffery Goldfarb’s work, cited in note 18 above, and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981): pp. 44-45 for a perspective drawn from the work of John Dewey and the “Chicago School” of sociology.

question (bourgeois housewives) are unimportant or dis-tasteful, but that they are, furthermore, incapable or unwilling to engage in self-reflection as to the conditions of their living, both materially and ideologically. Moreover, although perhaps less offensively, it denies the possibility that the cultural works produced by such individuals have a role to play in that process of reflexivity – the ability to elicit a self-reflective response, rather than merely an appreciation of superficial qualities.

I have sought in the first part of this dissertation to focus attention on the aspects of the scholarly literature on art that have contributed to the absence of attention to artworks and markets that are usually classed as decorative. One problem is the difficulty of accounting for the complex pattern of interactions between people and objects and spaces that make up such a market – of finding a methodology that can connect the practices of individuals in local markets with those in the wider society while maintaining a specificity to that local context – but also not forgetting the importance of the artworks themselves. Vera Zolberg's outline of such a practice applied to a somewhat-contained but in no way culturally-isolated local market like the one I have studied makes that issue far more manageable. But, by far, the largest obstacle faced by a writer looking into and at these paintings (or these types of paintings) is the ideological one that aligns academic/intellectual writing on art with avant-garde art itself, both seen to be devoted to the process of "advancing culture," while simultaneously

decrying and resisting the debased commodification and crass materialism seen to characterize contemporary bourgeois life. This difficulty is compounded by the particular history of Modernism's relationship with the space of the private home, which—despite important early associations between the two—has been marked by antipathy and the loading onto “domesticity” of the unfavorable (even antithetical) complex of associations now evoked by the term “decoration”: superficiality, un-professionalism, passivity, materialistic consumption, meaninglessness. That these terms may also (and are) applied to the straw (wo)man of the suburban housewife, emblem of contemporary bourgeois femininity and “trite art,” is equally pertinent.

Though I have, I hope, demonstrated that this definition of art as the opposite of decoration is inextricable from the construction of masculinity and femininity as gender categories and has complex historical and ideological roots dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the failures of recent scholarship to critically assess the anti-domestic bias discussed above *as it continues to be applied in contemporary, rather than historical contexts*, should demonstrate that, as Pollock says, “Modernism is still with us.” But on the other hand, of course, so is bourgeois culture. And while the politics of gender are still critical in understanding the origins and much of the current state of arts culture in America in particular, a century of the advancement of consumer capitalism has led to significant changes in the way the bourgeois vision is expressed, and by

whom. Thus, taking Pollock's analysis as a model for linking the practices of contemporary bourgeois art and femininity with both concrete and represented spaces, my description will propose revisions to her understanding of the relationship between women's art and women's lives today, while reaffirming that the ideological construction of gender and class is intimately tied with the practices of art. For, not to belittle her concerns about women's safety and the ways in which visual commodification of women's bodies contributes to making them objects of violence, Pollock's claim at the end of the third chapter that "women are denied the right to move around the city safely" is my point of departure from her analysis of the intersection of femininity, class, and art.<sup>28</sup>

It seems to me that it is precisely the freedom with which bourgeois women move in the post-modern city and suburb, and the specific patterns of their movements through various culturally-loaded spaces (commercial, recreational, and especially, domestic) on various scales, that marks and informs the visual and cultural logics of domestic art and the class identity in which it emerges. Contemporary "bourgeois femininity" has been remade with and in advanced consumer capitalism, in no small part by the bourgeois women who have found spaces opened to, for, and by them(selves) within the very fabric of

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<sup>28</sup> Pollock, p. 89. The complete citation is as follows: "Modernity is still with us, ever more acutely as our cities become in the exacerbated world of postmodernity, more and more a place of strangers and spectacle, while women are ever more vulnerable to violent assault while out in public and are denied the right to move around our cities safely. The spaces of femininity still regulate women's lives – from running the gauntlet of intrusive looks by men on the streets to surviving deadly sexual assaults."



allegedly “repressive” and “marginalizing” suburban space. I will argue that the constrained views, foreshortenings, divisions and compressions of spaces that marked the art of women Impressionists – a gendered *difference* in pictorial space that represented relationship and proximity – have corollaries in the art of domestic painting, in the spaces in which this art is experienced, and even in the geographic arrangement of contemporary near-suburbia and the homes which populate it. This art encodes a new, differently-“feminized” automobile suburbia, arranged and traversed by women according to something other than the mastering gaze of long perspectives: it is a territory marked by vignettes, little islands of a constructed hominess, and the constant play of private and public within commercial space. Not unlike the flâneur’s visual trajectory through Third Empire Paris (and perhaps in contradiction to Wolff’s assertion that there could be no *flâneuse*<sup>29</sup>), the particular patterns of movement and seeing of contemporary women in and through the public spaces of Atlanta, linked as they are with real and specific private homes on one hand and an idealized domesticity on the other, can help us read both the images produced and sold in these arenas, and understand how the paintings reflect the positions of these women back to themselves, and to us. Therefore, as I turn now to the concrete aspects of the domestic painting market, I will begin the next chapter by

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<sup>29</sup> Janet Wolff, “The Invisible *flâneuse*; women and the literature of modernity”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1985, 2 (3), 37-48.

returning to the space in which I began this entire descriptive project – seeing it with “new eyes” – from there moving into some of the domestic interiors that are both the market’s routes and its destinations, hoping not only to recapture the physical attributes of those paths and spaces, but also a sense of the spatial practice that occurs within them, and the part played in it by the paintings encountered along the way.

## CHAPTER IV:

### Intuitive Vision

Those things are best represented in our minds that are conveyed by and impressed upon our senses. Moreover, as the sharpest of all our senses must be that of sight, consequently, those things which are gathered in by the ears or by thinking are most easily held by the mind if they are also conveyed to the mind through the mediation of the eyes; such that things hidden and remote from the jurisdiction of sight are still marked by a sort of form or figure or image, so that we may possess *as if by seeing* that which we can scarcely embrace by thinking. Yet just as with all things that fall under our gaze, these forms or bodies must have a home, for indeed inconceivable is an object without its place.

—Cicero, *De Oratore*, II. lxxxvii, 357-358.

Objects that are cherished in this way really are born of an intimate light, and they attain to a higher degree of reality than indifferent objects, or those that are defined by geometric reality. For they produce a new reality of being, and they take their place not only in an order but in a community of order. From one object in a room to another, housewifely care weaves the ties that unite a very ancient past to the new epoch. The housewife awakens furniture that was asleep.

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 67.

I began the Introduction to this dissertation by describing the great number of paintings I could see even from my position in the entry hall of Anne Irwin's home, which had been converted for the weekend into a retail space: artworks were on the steps leading to the second floor, they were on the dining room table, they leaned against sofas and chairs, and I could have them all, so to speak, just by looking. I was understanding the scene at her home show (and

relating it to the reader) according to the extended lines of sight available to me from my central and centralizing point of view, partaking of a “mode of seeing” that is consistent with the dominant and ever more-pervasive visual regime of the contemporary post-modern West. Taken for a way of knowing, really, this mode presupposes the dominance of sight in the process of making the world intelligible to ourselves, and its variants include the formal order of linear perspective and the possessing gaze of the flâneur, but also what feminist film critic Laura Mulvey has described as the “logic of the gaze,” and even Pollock’s account of the contemporary city as comprising a world of spectacle and “intrusive looks.”<sup>1</sup> But by assuming that the meaning of the scene was available to me via this sort of primarily visual means, I missed clues about its more practical—and essential—character.

As I continued into the successive spaces of the home/exhibition, I was gently guided into nearly circular paths within and through the other rooms by

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<sup>1</sup> The references are to Mulvey’s seminal paper on the application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to feminist critique of film, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” (in C. Penley (Ed.), *Feminism and film theory*. New York: Routledge, 1988) and to Pollock’s comment cited at the end of the last chapter. My general argument, though, is especially indebted to the work of Henri Lefebvre. His *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) argues that *social space*—both concrete and a matter of human relationships, constituted and manipulated by daily practice—is the real venue in which power is deployed under the regime of advanced capitalism, correcting the tradition of western philosophy that has claimed historical time to be the principal organizing concept of human experience, and the visual field (everything from building facades and linear perspective to the written word) to be the most important expressions of and tools for the manipulation of such experience in the world. Lefebvre claims that the West’s undue and ultimately untrue emphasis on conceptualized *representations of space* serves to obscure rather than illuminate the activities of human beings in specific places: “Sight and seeing which in the Western tradition once epitomized intelligibility, have turned into a trap: the means whereby, in social space, diversity may be simulated and a travesty of enlightenment and intelligibility ensconced under the sign of transparency.” (p. 76.)

the arrangement (or, seemingly, disarray) of artworks, which necessitated frequent stops to get closer looks at works both small and large that were previously hidden and sometimes placed to overlap each other. Yet, as I was also distracted from full attention to the artworks – to the “work” of looking at them – by friendly conversation with Mrs. Irwin and other guests, I began to realize that there was concurrent with the dominant gaze another mode of seeing and knowing suggested by that space to the visitors in it, a mode related to the kind of intimate and relational viewpoints Pollock has ascribed to the artistic practice of Cassatt and Morisot. By presenting her home show as a place (and moment) where looking at paintings and establishing, continuing or renewing interpersonal relationships are understood to be concurrent, if not contiguous activities, Mrs. Irwin touched upon a central connection between the objects in the home and the activities that occur within it. This connection expressed practically gives domestic painting its particular identity and character, or – put another way – its *look*.

This alternative mode of seeing does not imply a stationary, elevated, and order-imposing eye (as with my view from the hall), but instead implies a body in motion, responding in many small ways to the successive instances, spaces, and objects presented to it along its course of movement through familiar rooms. Where the postmodern “gaze” posits a mastering *eye/I* that stands apart from, dissects, consumes (and finally *abstracts*) physical space and objects, this second

mode restores the faculty of sight to its organic (though still privileged) place within the community of the senses within the body, helping the body itself understand its place in the lived environment. Furthermore – and of central importance – this mode of vision is invested in and invoked by particular objects (*e.g.*, artworks) which serve as aids in navigating intimate cultural space by representing to the mind patterned experiences of the places of daily living, especially the particular and peculiar combinations of *passage through* and *lingering in* that mark life 'at home.'<sup>2</sup>

Pollock has argued that artworks created in the domestic sphere (or at least by artists for whom it is home) can represent some of the essential character of an historical domestic practice encoded as a particular style of vision. Such a vision does not merely show the objective characteristics of the physical space depicted in the work, but, by suggesting how those objective features are perceived from within, also gives a hint of the social space that permeates the physical space – the boundaries, paths and positions available to the nominal subject of the work, who is also the inhabitant or “practitioner” of the space. In other words, such artworks seem to offer a transparent window onto how the

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<sup>2</sup> While T. J. Clark's and Pollock's understanding the Parisian flâneur and his gaze similarly depends on tracing patterns of movement by individuals through social space (of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century city, in that case), key differences between that visual regime (in which the body serves primarily to transport the literal “wandering eye” of the Bourgeois man) and the one I will be describing reside in the relationships implied between the body, eyes, spaces, and identity of the viewer: whereas the flâneur's visual forays into public space were marked by the *anonymity* of himself and his gaze, what I will describe is the process by which identity is not just rehearsed but *made visible* through the deployment of objects and artworks in domestic interiors.

spaces of domesticity are lived (their phenomenology) by showing how the spaces are seen, as if “through the eyes” of one who lives in them.<sup>3</sup>

While this idea that the work of women artists, especially, gives us a chance to see them and their peers and spaces “through their own eyes” is both attractive and compelling, we must be wary of taking such a metaphor too literally, especially with regards to domestic painting in Atlanta. Pollock argues that because the bourgeois gender category *femininity* was significantly expressed through the regulation of women’s movements through space (and hence what they ought to see and when they, themselves, ought to be seen), Cassatt and Morisot made an active intervention into the ideological construction of that category by consciously and publicly depicting what was usually *unseen* except by and in the company of bourgeois women. In short, their paintings graphically demonstrated the artists’ self-consciousness of their conditions of living and working.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite the facts that the artists may have become reflexively aware of their conditions via the working process (and even communicated that awareness to their women friends and family), and that many works remained in private (women’s) hands and before private eyes, that many were also intended for public exhibition as part of Cassatt’s own career

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<sup>3</sup> But not just through the eyes, either. Pollock’s discussion of the low, child-like viewing position implied by Cassatt’s *Young girl in a blue armchair*, (1878), which, she says, evokes the child’s “sense of the space of the room,” a “combination of touch, texture, as well as sight,” rather than just her perspective, is part of her discussion of that artist’s picturing “phenomenological space [that] is not orchestrated for sight alone but by means of visual cues refers to other sensations and relations of bodies and objects in the lived world.” (Pollock, p. 65.) This concept of phenomenological space is central to my sense of the meaning of domestic painting.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

aspirations among her peer group of professional artists suggests that the “window into their world” understanding of the paintings still and nevertheless presupposes an outside eye looking *through* the artwork/window *into* domestic space.<sup>5</sup> This is even more true from the position of an historically-remote writer; for all that Pollock was able to see *through* these paintings, what remain invisible are the artworks themselves as objects seen integrally with (rather than as depictions of) the interior space and its practice.

### *Looking in*

In the context of the contemporary Atlanta market, the artworks I have classed as belonging to domestic painting often seem to function more as mirrors reflecting and reinforcing domesticity back into the spaces of home – for its own inhabitants and intimates – than as windows in or through. Still-lives and interiors are the most common subjects, with still-lives often focusing on familiar flowers (perhaps grown in the owner’s own garden) in porcelain vases or bowls, or on items so familiar that they are likely to be found even in the same house as the painting, sometimes even in the same room. Pieces or small ensembles of china or personal items (like shoes) are usually rendered with minimal

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<sup>5</sup> That women, whether producers or consumers of visual texts constructed according to (or even just within a culture dominated by) the regime of the “male gaze,” always find themselves thusly caught ‘between looks,’ or participating in the negation or visual commodification of the female subject, is a central problem taken up by Pollock and other feminist historians of art and visual culture. The alternative visual practice I propose in the following pages suggests another response to this situation.



contextualization or background detail, whether executed in watercolors or in oil on canvas (*Figure 1, Figure 2*). Especially for oil paintings, visible brushwork contributes to the flattening of the pictorial space, and calls attention to the painting, itself, as an object in the same space as the viewer.

Paintings of interiors tend to be more stylized and brightly colored (Post-Impressionistic), and somewhat larger than still-lives, but also with a compressed visual space and an emphasis on the objects in it that matches that seen in the still-lives. In fact, they may be considered still-lives in their own right – albeit room-scale ones – since they seldom include figures (*Figure 3*). When images do give visual passage through the boundaries of the home, they often follow the still-life formula of restricted view and depth, sometimes use a viewpoint explicitly from inside out (pictures of gardens as if seen from the house, for example, perhaps even with the gardener pictured (*Figure 4*), or show a romanticized version of the house, itself as seen from outside. Even images of conventionally picturesque scenery are not primarily “about” distant views of space themselves or even the beauty of the scene depicted, but represent arenas of relational ties and memory. And again, pictorial depth is often subverted by a stylistic emphasis on the arrangement of forms and colors on the surface of the work, whether in an Impressionist or Post-Impressionist style. Whether of the beach, mountains, or the Mediterranean countryside, paintings of this sort almost invariably depict a childhood home, current “home away from home,” a

favorite vacation spot, or the site of other important shared experiences (*Figure 5*). Thus, in these works, the “outside” nevertheless serves to reinforce emotional and social interiority.

Let me reiterate that the distinctive way of seeing here is not confined to the strictly visual; that is, the artworks evoke – even amplify – phenomenological space rather than merely pictorial space (which I’ve already described as minimally-developed), thus to understand the “look” of some of these paintings and identify some of their common pictorial strategies and style, we must see them not only *in* the domestic context, but *as they are seen* in the domestic context: often obliquely, sometimes in passing, and nearly always in reciprocal relation to the other objects and paths of movement in the house. These works are less depictions of space than symbolic extensions of it, or even catalysts for experiencing the household itself as a richly evocative, symbolic, and representational space whose dual nature as both “structure” and “activity” is suggested by the word *dwelling*. For though we may expect to perceive paintings as primarily visual objects, the mode of vision or way of seeing inherent to domestic painting derives from and represents this embodied experience of inhabiting the terrain of contemporary bourgeois domesticity of which the artwork is but one part.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bergmann’s reconstruction of the changing visual relationships between the wall paintings of a Pompeian home is a very suggestive model for the domestic integration of movement and sight, because she connects the *process* of seeing these relationships in the space of the villa’s chambers with Roman mnemonic and rhetorical practices, resulting in a “topograph[y] of the imagination”

Still, the part played by artworks in this regime is not a small one, for this way of experiencing domestic space is literally embodied in the objects of domestic painting. While artists working in this market do produce and sell large works, and these same paintings find their way to over sofa or mantelpiece where they can be viewed from a distance and taken in (just as I took in the initial view at Mrs. Irwin's show), by and large domestic paintings are small in scale and well-suited to be placed on small walls or on shelves, over end tables and as part of groups of objects, often in the less-public spaces of the house where the residents do most of their dwelling. Such works do not require that a person position her body for the benefit of the eye's clear and unobstructed (or distant) view; they do not call out, "Look at me!" Instead, they are more often seen for a few moments in the course of some common, habituated journey from room to room, or during moments of rest (or at least pause) in the "working" areas of the house – hallways, the kitchen, bedroom, and even bathrooms.

The eye that looks at paintings in this manner is thus re-integrated with the body in the whole process of daily life, but this does not mean that the works

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and memory. She argues that Roman metaphors, figures of speech, and rhetorical strategies that drew upon the arrangement of objects in an imagined house made sense because they were based on the locale in which memory – personal, family, cultural – really was enacted and concretized. Furthermore, the authenticity, and realness of such houses of the imagination (and contemporary ones, too) depends on movement through them because "the body in motion plays a fundamental role in the process of remembering, for it 'domesticates' space by attuning itself to the surroundings in order to "inhabit" and "feel at home" in past places. The body is not stationary, but a moving center in relation to which things constantly change position." [Bettina Bergmann, "The Roman House as Memory Theater: the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii." *Art Bulletin*, vol. 76 No. 2 (June 1994): p. 226.]

themselves are insignificant, nor that the visual field is not, in those instances, playing a critical role in the experience of domesticity and identity. On the contrary, such moments of aesthetic difference lift daily life above the level of mere routine, not because of some purported human need for beauty in the abstract, but because – whether or not they are “pretty pictures” – small artworks in this setting evoke and encode associations and memories of and for the inhabitant precisely through their visual qualities, as recognized through the particular visual/spatial habits of the home. Being clearly within and standing *for* but also standing *out from* the fabric of daily practice is that which makes these artworks meaningful rather than “merely decorative.”

What I’m describing is a way of simultaneously relating to and producing the symbolically rich space of the home, turning on frequent though brief encounters between the viewer/resident and aesthetic objects that nearly glow with emotional and memorial associations, and that project this identity-illuminating light back into the domestic space, in order to emphasize the status of the home itself as the arena in which relationship (and therefore identity) is lived – practically, repetitively, but truly. Interpersonal relationships are experienced (literally embodied) in the regular patterns of interaction between members of a household. These patterns of seemingly-mundane events (both movement and pause) around the house, built up over time by the people who live there in the course of their daily interpersonal routines, define the space in

which they occur as much as they are contained by that space. Therefore, the physical parameters of the home become synonymous not only with habitual movements and patterns of activity, but with the relational landscape of its inhabitants, as well. In order to make this connection more tangible, palpable and manipulable, the landscape of identity thus defined is also focused through or invested in objects (artworks, especially) that represent the fabric of domestic life and identity more efficiently than does trying to realize the complex of spaces and habits as a whole. These objects themselves become part of the structural space of the home, but also the spatial practice of the home (paths are altered to account for their presence), and not only by re-presenting what was already there.<sup>7</sup> As aesthetic objects are often pre-loaded with emotional and relational meanings or associations, either on account of their makers or the circumstances under which they were acquired for the home, they enrich and expand the environment in which they are placed, subject to the overall identity of the home.

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<sup>7</sup> In *Home Rules* (1994), Beck and Woods argue that the arrangement of belongings within the frame of physical building (walls, doorways, corners) elicits patterns of movement in the home that are key not only to understanding how and what the objects there mean, but how the memory and history of the family is made both active and concrete (thus constantly renewed) through the objects. The juxtaposition of objects in a room produces different sequences in which they may be experienced depending on who is moving from where to where, such that a bit of family history or identity evoked by a particular object may be either amplified or contradicted by the moment of “who we are” evoked by the next object encountered. In their terms, artworks, houseplants and sofas not only “speak” to the inhabitants (and each other), but do so in differing “tones of voice,” (p. 49) a fact which helps explain why calling them “furnishings” seems woefully inadequate: “Even to refer to them as furnishings is to miss the point, for few rooms are furnished; they are not stages set by a designer on which some actors will recite their lines, they are not settings: they are the resultant—in the sense of a sum of vectors—of a living” (*Ibid.*, p. 4). This is extremely similar to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s statement that “furniture [may be seen] . . . as a culturally defined “frame” for structuring the experiential living space . . . its importance [is] as a means of establishing a sense of personal continuity and meaning in an otherwise impersonal environment” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, p. 102).

The result is a “triangular dialectic” (trialectic?) between space, practice, and aesthetic objects, in which each element is *reflexive* – mutually-defining and mutually-referential with the others, *quotidian* – having its meaning in repeated, everyday encounters (and also seeming otherwise common or ordinary), and *subjective* – the meaning of each space, practice, and object is dependent and even subordinated to the relational identity of the primary subject(s) of the space, expressed as its particular *domesticity*.<sup>8</sup>

The kind of aesthetic sensibility I’m describing, then, is keenly related to the way individuals see *in* their own homes, with their whole bodies, and bringing to bear on their literal “sense” of the space their memory as well as present physical experience of movement and stillness. As used above, *dwelling* and *inhabiting* help conjure up the idea that what people do in private homes is richer and more complex than a practice of merely conforming their movements to the built environment; this other mode of seeing is the complement to those principal terms and partakes of their connotations of focused, repeated (habitual), even comfortably-purposeful action. The Latin root *intueor* – “to look at attentively, to consider, contemplate” – gives us *intuition* and *intuitive*, which I

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<sup>8</sup> This formulation parallels Lefebvre’s trio of terms *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational space*, which together comprise an action-discourse-meaning axis (or, in his words, a “lived – conceived – perceived triad”) that defines the different ways people relate to social space and its images. *Representational space* is the most fully-lived and meaningful sense of space, perceived through experience of “its associated images and symbols” by human subjects. This is the kind of space, says Lefebvre, “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects [and] tend[ing] towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs” (Lefebvre, pp. 38-39).

will adopt to describe this mode of seeing precisely because to that original meaning of “intentional acuity” our contemporary usage adds a sense of natural, almost unwittingly-attained knowledge which is therefore (or nevertheless) taken to be true.<sup>9</sup> *Intuition* (literally, then, “a looking in”), then, is a practice as much as a faculty, focused through the eyes and onto mediating artworks that allude to and confirm the present-ness of the body in the intimate and identity-filled space of the home. *Intuitive vision* is how this form of *dwelling* “looks.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Living Rooms*

Though I am focusing on a particular set of works, artists and buyers in Atlanta, this way of experiencing art in the space of the home is not limited only to artworks produced in and for the domestic painting market. Many of the aesthetic objects to be encountered in the homes I studied were not part of the domestic market, *per se* (i.e., they were not produced in it), yet the way they were placed and experienced by the residents in the home was entirely consistent with the phenomenological system I’m describing as *intuitive vision*. So while it is the mark of domestic painting that its works do not need to be re-appropriated for this task, but are “born to it,” the concept of intuitive vision is helpful for

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<sup>9</sup> Although not the primary feature of my use of *intuitive*, also included here is a deliberate connotation that knowledge that we perceive as coming “out of thin air” is actually an inculcated understanding of the socially-derived rules and possibilities that Bourdieu has called *habitus*, or a “feel for the game,” and that Giddens has labeled “unconscious knowledge.”

<sup>10</sup> The habits and practices devoted to *arranging* spaces and objects for this basic purpose are, themselves, corollaries to this way of relating to the domestic space and its objects, whether or not these practices have been professionalized, rationalized, commercialized and rechristened as “decoration” or “interior design.”

understanding how people experience a variety of aesthetic objects in many specific home environments. Conversely, looking at several specific home environments can illuminate how the qualities of *reflexivity*, *subjectivity*, and *quotidianity* are expressed in varying degrees and proportions in particular instances of intuitive domesticity, and direct us to the qualities that suit artworks in the market to their particular roles therein.

### *Quotidianity*

“Everyday” objects and habits (like brushing one’s teeth before bed, or having a cup of coffee in the morning) may be inconsequential when considered alone, but often seem fundamental in the context of living as part of a person’s “way of life.” Similarly, *quotidianity* describes how mundane-seeming works are valorized by being woven into the fabric of daily patterns, but also how the aesthetic autonomy of artworks (as understood in traditional art-historical systems) is subordinated to the phenomenological aesthetic emerging from the everyday practice of domesticity. Whether a post-card is ennobled or a masterpiece humbled, in both cases artwork serves practical, quotidian identity.

Several factors may contribute to the valorization of an otherwise commonplace object. For one, such works are seldom without some pre-existing meaning and relational value, as an art-themed note-card may be kept because of the sentiment expressed inside, or a child’s drawing may be valued as a marker



of the child's personality at that stage in life more than because of technical skill demonstrated in its execution. This is the ever-present *subjective* quality I describe below. Nevertheless, weaving such ordinary aesthetic objects into the home so that they do real emotional work on an ongoing basis usually begins with the act of putting them in physical frames,<sup>11</sup> and is completed by placing them in an experiential one: integrating them into the patterns of movement through the house, such that passing by them becomes part of the regular experience of living there. This is quintessentially true when both the works and the repetitive encounters occur in and are scaled to intimate spaces where the basic cyclical functions of life happen – kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms, and even the small hallways that link them.

*Figure 6* and *Figure 7* show half of a pair of instances of *quotidianity* occurring in one home, the pair working in tandem to link space and identity. The artwork is a framed postcard advertising an exhibition at a local art gallery, framed as “an unexpected gift” to the owner of the house, Susan McGill,<sup>12</sup> by the gallery owner. The relationship between the giver and the recipient of the image depended not on a common love of art or even a visit to the exhibition

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<sup>11</sup> The practice of framing children's artwork or even mass-produced graphic designs has parallels in the long history of elevating the mundane or vulgar as “art” in avant-garde culture, whether the point is to lampoon hierarchies of art culture (as with Duchamp), or to critique either bourgeois propriety or consumer culture (as with Warhol). While all these instances reinforce the idea that the attention of an artist imbues a thing with additional meaning, the critical difference between avant-garde strategies and this domestic valorization is that the latter lacks the ironic intent of the former. Instead of rendering objects into a kind of speech-act, the lavishing of attention on common things that occurs in the home helps the objects “take their place in the community of order” of the home (Bachelard, p. 67).

<sup>12</sup> Interview 58 (2003) .

advertised, but on a third person – one of the resident’s co-workers, who was at the time of the gift the gallery owner’s girlfriend. The gift was in response to several visits by the gallery-owner to his girlfriend’s place of business, during which he saw that Mrs. McGill liked the picture enough to keep the postcard on her desk. Once received, the framed card was brought home and has been placed in a hallway connecting the kitchen and the dining room of the 1920s-era house. Bounded on one side by the staircase, the passage is a primary conduit between the informal rear and more formal forward rooms, but it is also on the course usually traced when moving from the kitchen onto the stairway itself and up to the second-floor bedrooms; the space is not the heart of the house, but it is certainly a major artery.

In its new context, the framed postcard enlivens an otherwise mundane (though constantly-used) passage with visual pleasure, but a pleasure that is also inextricable from its role as a reminder of satisfying friendships at work that have spilled into other areas of life, and into the home. Mrs. McGill noted that, “whenever I walk by here I see it, and it makes me feel good because of my friendship – they [the co-worker and gallery owner] are now married.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the daily process of coming and going in the home, this “private” sphere is shot through with connections to the “public” life of the residents, so that what is reinforced is the home’s role as a staging ground for making new connections, rather than as a retreat or refuge from them. Seeing this framed card reminds the

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<sup>13</sup> Interview 58 (2003)

residents of the house that their personal identities are inseparable from their roles in forging and encouraging the relationships of others, as with the case of the romance mentioned above.

At the top of the same staircase hangs a painting by the elder of the family's two children, made when she was still in high school, and which both the husband and the wife of the family mentioned as being one of the very favorite works in the house (*Figure 8*). When asked why, they specifically cited its aesthetic qualities of color and paint handling (as well as its title, "Beyond Prozac"), but also noted that it was seen every time a family member came downstairs from the bedrooms. The painting had once been placed over a chest of drawers at the foot of the stairs, in a place visible from the public living room, but the fact that it had "migrated" seemed to suit everyone in the family, including the daughter, who was self-deprecating about the painting and surprised by her parents' fondness for it. Moving it to the head of the stairs accomplished several things: enshrined in the repetitive daily experience of descending the stairs, the work is before the eyes of the parents more often and more directly than it was in the ostensibly more-honored spot below, though it is still visible from certain locations on the first floor. And since the daughter has moved out of the house and into a professional career, the painting serves to keep *her* symbolically before the eyes and in the minds of her parents, too, as a reminder of their past but ongoing role in her life. More specifically, moving the

painting to a slightly more privatized location also marks and honors the very humility that the parents value in their daughter. Thus, seeing the painting so regularly in such a (literally) familiar way and in this particular spot evokes the character of the particular parent-child relationship shared by the McGills and the artist, especially its humble, *every day* nature. The painting also crowns the emotional animation of the stairwell itself, begun and anchored below by the framed post-card memento of the family's more public relationships.

In these first two cases, the quality of *quotidianeity* invested small or familiar objects with greater significance than they might enjoy in another context or experienced in another way; the next example, though, is a case in which some of a "*bona fide*" artwork's claims to special attention and valuation are minimized by the way it is practically experienced, and an alternative system for its valuation is substituted in its place. *Figure 9* shows an oil-on-canvas landscape by A.E. Backus, an artist with a long and successful career built on his depictions of the south Florida landscape and whose work has well-established market value in his native region. The painting is not particularly small, but measures approximately 20" x 24," is nicely framed, and lit by a permanently-mounted picture light recessed into the ceiling of the family room at the rear of the house.

Contributing to the value placed on it by the resident is the fact that the work is by a "known artist," here meaning both "famous" and with a personal

connection to the owner, Anna Morton who, herself, grew up in Florida. The fact that the resident's father, recently deceased, was a long-time supporter and collector of his contemporary, (not inconsequentially through his business in commercial real estate) and contributed to the growth of his professional reputation is also a point of pride for the owner of the painting. Another layer is added to the patina of personal and family history that clings to the object by the fact that this painting was a wedding present from Mrs. Morton's father, and the then-young couple chose the artwork over a "more practical" and hardly less-expensive air conditioner. When also taking into account that the house in which it is displayed was the home of her parents, and has recently been renovated and inhabited by this second generation, it is easy to understand why the painting literally occupies a special place in the life of the Morton family.<sup>14</sup>

Yet even as this synergy of public valuation and private meaning would seem to indicate the painting ought be set to "command the room," the *daily practice* of the space effectively integrates it in a different and – again – familiarized or domesticated way. When the house was renovated, the garage was converted to a light, open room that connects to the kitchen via both an open doorway and a pass-trough window over the sink area. Another doorway connects the room to the rest of the house, and French doors open onto the patio and garden. While the painting is (not insignificantly) hung in this new family room, the chairs there are arranged as a conversational group, oriented more

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<sup>14</sup> Interview 60 (2003).

towards each other and even towards a large television and a painting over it than towards this landscape painting.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the wall on which it hangs (in a shallow alcove between two bookcases) parallels the regular paths of entry and crossing in the room, so that those entering the room from either the kitchen or the other parts of the house would not see it head-on; lit as it usually is, it would rather seem to hover over the shoulders of those coming to or sitting in the room – noticed, but peripherally. While this sort of semi-viewing is consistent with my earlier description of how objects are experienced via intuitive vision, the layout of the artwork and room intentionally establish another perspective as the primary way to engage the painting, in which the role of sight seems more equivocal.

At first glance, looking into the family room at the painting while standing at the kitchen sink appears to restore to prominence the work's *visibility*; *Figure 10* shows that the painting is directly across and in full view from the window. But a couple of clues indicate that even here, *quotidianeity* is in play. First of all, the window is narrow enough that it excludes the view of the painting for anyone in the kitchen except the person standing at the apex of the kitchen's working triangle; if a person can see the painting from here, she is in the midst of washing dishes, scrubbing vegetables, or getting someone a drink of water. The

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that work over the television is a large, unframed oil painting of a beach scene with small children. The children are the same age as several of the residents' grandchildren, some of whom are convinced that it is actually a picture of them. This painting may be read as the family "present," complementing the "past" evoked by the Florida landscape.

experience of appreciating the work is contiguous with rather than set apart from the routine chores of daily life, integrated by its regular repetition during these very common, cyclical, yet essential household activities. Second, even the specifically optical experience of the long view across the family room (which I earlier claimed usually privileges an artwork) here serves to diminish the painting's independent stature rather than increase it. Simply put, the distance makes the painting look small. In fact, viewed in context, it appears in scale with the smaller paintings that are most common in this market, and even with the framed family photos on the countertop in front of the sink. The combination of its placement in the physical frame of the room and the regular patterns of use of the family room and kitchen effectively domesticate the artwork's formal qualities and diminish its claims for autonomy, *but not its significance*. When one considers that the chairs between the painting and the viewer are often occupied by close friends or members of the house, the painting seems even more like a theatrical backdrop for family scenes viewed (and participated in) from the kitchen sink. An important memorial symbol itself, the landscape is not the main player, yet provides the context—an allusion to historical and emotional depth—that sets the stage for the interpersonal roles rehearsed daily by those that actually live the room.

## *Reflexivity*

Considering the same Florida landscape painting, an even better analogy for the particular sort of historical, emotional background it adds to the scene is that of a mirror, since a mirror gives a sense of depth (though only as deep as the space it reflects) in which the inhabitants can literally see themselves – an act of “self-reflection” that encompasses all the connotations of that word, both visual and psychological. Through such *reflexivity*, the room itself is expanded, the new “space” is visually linked to the physical room by the repetition of its shapes and colors as images, and – this is critical – the inhabitants are prompted to a heightened self-awareness of being in both the concrete and the imaged worlds simultaneously. Despite the often-decried superficiality of our visual age, seeing a thing (or oneself) depicted can actually make it seem more real, concrete, and tangible; and while paintings are not literal mirrors, experiencing art according to intuitive vision often evokes precisely this sort of reflexive experience: the artwork re-presents the whole social, interpersonal, practical space of the room in emblematic form, making it concisely available to the viewer. This dynamic reflexivity is at the heart of the visual connections made between artworks and the domestic spaces in which they hang.

Visual connections of this sort may sometimes be subtle and almost ephemeral; looking again at the figures of the Florida landscape in context, notice that the stem of the potted orchid that sits on the shelf below mimics the line of



the palm trees in the painting, extending up and breaking the framed boundary of the painting, thus linking the pictorial space to the physical space of the room. Neither the choice of the tropical orchid, nor its initial placement, nor even the angle to which it was turned were haphazard; the arrangement and room – like the orchid itself – have been cultivated.

But accusations of “swatch-matching” notwithstanding, artworks are regularly connected to the room through colors as well as shapes, whether this means a coordinating paint is chosen for the walls, or that other small accent items are added to pick up and repeat (“go with”) the objects pictured. Looking again at the painting shown in *Figure 4*, for instance, one notices that the shape and color of the lampshade on the table below the work echoes those of the gardener’s hat in the work, and the walls have been painted a pale green that complements the colors of the artwork. More often, though, paintings are chosen to “go with” and amplify the interpersonal use of the room, rather than just continuing (or initiating) its decorative scheme. This is especially common in contemporary eat-in kitchens, where still-lives of tables set with dishes and food and a vase of flowers evoke the ideal of families sitting together for shared meals. (*Figure 11*) Even if such paintings do not exactly picture the actual tables nearby, which are likely to be strewn with mail and homework and may see such family gatherings infrequently, the images reaffirm the value of the occasions when they do occur, mark them as the highest use for the space itself, and bring

memories of past instances to the minds of those who regularly and frequently pass through the room.

Reflexivity is most clear, however, when what is pictured in art *does* directly correspond to objects in the same living space, such that the artwork becomes a sign for the relational practices occurring in the space and involving the concrete object pictured. The small painting shown in *Figure 12* is a somewhat unusual example, but one that emphasizes the relational aspects of even this most-visual quality of the intuitive mode. The painting shows the homeowner's Dachshund and sits in a prime location on the kitchen counter-top, sharing space with bills, car-keys, cell-phone accessories, and a couple of porcelain figurines. When the family is at home and in the kitchen, the dog is nearly always in the room with them, too, such that the owner could easily look from dog to painting and back again. Therefore, the work is placed where it is not to memorialize a beloved pet, nor to glorify a pampered show animal. What the painting makes visible—especially to the woman of the house—is not the dog at all, but the woman's ongoing role as caretaker and nurturer of the dog and of all the other dependent members of the family, a role inscribed especially in this particular space.

What is perhaps the prototypical (and one of the most common) reflexive relationship between domestic paintings and objects in their surroundings, though, is that between paintings featuring blue-and-white China or other

imported porcelain objects and collections of such objects in the same house, or even room. *Figure 13* shows the same watercolor that was pictured in *Figure 1*, but in an expanded view that takes in both the pieces of China above and around it, and the wicker correspondence table over which it sits. *Figure 14* shows the still-wider context of the family room/Kitchen space of the house, in which other pieces of porcelain are displayed high on the walls and on the countertop, as well. The wicker chair that faces the watercolor in question is just visible at the lower right-hand side of this photograph.

Unlike the case of the dachshund portrait, here the painting does not represent one specific object in the room that, itself, suggests a set of associated relationships. Instead, the painting here represents and unifies a constellation of objects that individually stand for events and moments of personal and family history, and together represent the patterns and habits through which those moments are remembered and experienced as part of the identity-containing role of the home. In the many houses I surveyed that had collections of plates, vases, figurines, tea-pots and cups and the like, the homeowner was able to recount the circumstances under which each piece was acquired, invariably in terms of trips taken, birthday gifts received, or family objects inherited.<sup>16</sup> Few were purchased either for alleged “investment value” or to fill spaces in the décor of the home.

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<sup>16</sup> Here “collection” means only “multiple similar pieces acquired over time,” and does imply the self-conscious acquisition of objects or works to create an art-historically or monetarily significant set.

But as easily and readily as the individual pieces elicited stories, the tellers often remarked that it was only very occasionally that they took the time or effort (dishes are often displayed high on walls or in other physically less-accessible spots) to move in this manner from piece to piece in a room, much less in the whole house. Still, the inhabitants were routinely mindful of the pieces that surrounded them and what they meant, often because a single painting gave their diffuse “awareness” a concisely concrete and immediately visible form. Placed in a readily and regularly visible spot (directly in front of the woman of the house as she sits to pay bills or write correspondence, for instance), a small painting of a tea-cup, or plate, or vase becomes a convenient focus and visual pivot—an efficient way to allude to all of the pottery without the person standing, craning, and looking about. But more than that, such an artwork so placed reflects the whole set of *memories and meanings* arrayed about the room in the form of pieces of china, and in the process it becomes part of the set, too, even as it re-presents the set by way of a pictorial and symbolic efficiency. Both china and artwork are experienced within and as part of the patterns of activity that mark the room as a memorial arena, but looking at the painting takes the place of and stands for the act of engaging each individual piece of ceramic in the room; though there may also be explicit design related connections established between the artwork and the space, the primary effect of *reflexivity* is to integrate the work as an extension of the space of living that reflects the practice of being “at home.”

### *Subjectivity*

As a quality of artworks in the domestic setting, *subjectivity* tends to subsume both *quotidianness* and *reflexivity*, though it does not negate them as separate ways of experiencing specific works in context. *Subjectivity* means that the physical attributes of artworks and other objects in the household environment are overlain with emotional and memorial associations that pre-exist the placement of the object in the physical context of the house. It also means that both intrinsic qualities of the work (the subject, for instance) and its contextualized role in the arranged home are explicitly geared to the task of supporting and shaping the residents' own subjectivity, or identity. The importance of artworks painted or given by family members or friends is an example of this, but a more complex rendering of this dynamic can be found in the common practice of grouping objects and artworks and photographs in something akin to family shrines, though without the kind of ritualized attention that term implies. These arrangements are tableaux of family history, suggesting the family is a living and changing thing.

A good example of the importance of subjective meanings associated with artworks in this fashion comes in the form of a set of five watercolors of Prague, recently brought back from there by the owner of one of the homes I visited, Jill Ratliffe. The trip was occasioned by a daughter's participation in a school choral

group invited to give performances in the Czech Republic, and Mrs. Ratliffe went as one of several adult chaperones. The paintings are placed to be seen every day on the central thoroughfare of the house, but on a side wall perpendicular to the public visual axis that runs from the front door to the back of the living room (*Figure 15*). In other words, they are not immediately visible by guests or casual visitors, and may be ignored and passed by when moving from the front of the house to the living room at the rear. There is a subtle but significant difference between this off-axis placement and placing works in an out of the way spot, such as the dining room where the family seldom eats, or in a private space, such as the bedroom. These works are meant to be seen, but they are best seen when approached as an intimate to the house, coming down the long hallway (in which hang some of their children's artworks) from the bedroom wing towards the kitchen—just as the family does regularly in the course of daily life (*Figure 16*). The paintings themselves are also fairly small, so that the pictorial space in them is not readily apparent from any great distance, but must be approached up close to be noticed or understood; from anything beyond a few feet away, they are experienced as a group not just with each other, but also as part of an ensemble that includes the chest of drawers below them and the things sitting on top of the chest (*Figure 17*).

The representational space evoked by this group of paintings is neither confined nor exhausted by the physical space of the intersecting hallways, of

course; it includes Mrs. Ratliffe's spatial/relational memory of being in Prague with her daughter, as depicted in the images of the old city. The images themselves – as are all souvenir paintings of this sort – are meant to evoke such memories, usually by picturing the landmark historical buildings or geographical features of the place. But it is important to note that such sites are often depicted more phenomenologically than architecturally, letting the human viewer's perspective determine the scene. These paintings represent the experience of catching glimpses of Prague's domes up and through the narrow streets of the city, seen between decidedly Old-world buildings or across bridges; they are less about the buildings and monuments than "what it was like" to be in Prague. In this case, "what it was like" means specifically "being in Prague with my daughter," the narrow medieval streets of Prague becoming, through art, a container for the never-past memories associated with the mother and daughter's relationship.

This dynamic of relational memory as subjective filter continues in the objects below the watercolors, which are also memorial in nature, evoking stories that are easily and readily told: there are two photographs of the elder children at the time of their high-school graduations and a clock inherited from the owner's grandmother that has been recently "restored," but that is now over-shiny, rendered "new and improved" rather than "like it was." But also on the chest is a ceramic model of the house's façade, made as a school art-class

assignment by the youngest daughter, just as the other children had been required to do when they were in the same grade as she.<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Ratliffe logically connects this model with the others (already displayed together in another room), not only as an emblem of continuity and connection between her children, but also a marker of their individual subjectivities – the way they each (literally and figuratively) “see” their shared home – and the fact that each particular subjectivity in the house is in relationship to the others. Thus, the very shape of the object serves to name the house as the locus where the family identity is negotiated and expressed. Moreover, that the newest one awaits eventual framing and placement with the others, but currently remains part of this ensemble is an indication of the fluidity and changeability, the always in-progress-ness of the house, too. These are not static environments, fixed in time once and for all, but are constantly changing, being filled with the emotional, as well as physical clutter of living life, and in sharp contrast to the idea of “finished space” or even decoration as the projected eye mastering the lived room.<sup>18</sup>

One more layer is added to this dynamic (as well as a reminder that this is a space for bodies in motion, not still-camera reflections) when a viewer notices

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<sup>17</sup>Mrs. Ratliffe’s obvious disappointment at how the “restoration” of the clock turned out suggests how important it is that the aesthetic qualities of an object or work correspond to (not to say “match”) its perceived meaning in the domestic context. Yet, though perhaps too brazenly, there is also nevertheless a visual echo between the gold clock and the accents of gold in the paintings, just as there is an echo between the architectural content of the paintings and the ceramic house. These patterns and visual connections are an aspect of *reflexivity* in the house that link the objects together and with the space of subjectivity.

<sup>18</sup> This section utilizes material primarily from the second from two conversations with Mrs. Ratliffe: Interview 25 (1995) and Interview 57 (2003).



the petit-point bell-pull that hangs on the narrow wall directly across from the Czech watercolors, and two more paintings that hang on the bedroom hallway wall, almost on the corner (all visible in *Figure 15*). Like the Prague watercolors, these paintings were bought in commemoration of family times away from the house: one as a souvenir of a father-son college tour, the other to mark a family trip to the beach. The bell-pull connects several generations of Mrs. Ratliffe's family because it had belonged to her mother, and had also (although not without some staining from smoke and water) survived a catastrophic fire in the family's previous house that damaged the clock described above and destroyed nearly every one of the other artworks and pieces of furniture that had already integrated into the family's sense of home. The combination of objects and images on and above the chest, whether bought, inherited from or made by current or previous generations of the family, elicits and illustrates a feeling of collectively-lived and resilient family identity, with links both to the past and future; and though separated from it by a few feet, the bell-pull and the two paintings are nevertheless part of that interpersonal tableau, moving the focus of its identity-forming capacity from the periphery to the center of these intersecting hallways and axes of movement. The dynamism of the family's identity and the resident's role as Mother and chief cultivator of subjective space is re-enacted, re-activated each time this arrangement of artworks and objects is seen and *passed through* during the day. This crossroads of the home

demonstrates how *subjectivity* as a component of intuitive vision is a quality of artworks geared for domestic space, but is also the goal and result of experiencing the artworks once they have been integrated into the richly specific arena of the home.<sup>19</sup>

### *Housewifely Care*

Here, then, is the crux of the difference between how artworks are used in the domestic market and how they are conceived of in more visually/verbally-oriented contemporary art markets: paintings seen via intuitive vision are used to mark specific parts, and sometimes even the whole phenomenological experience of “home” through the sense of sight, but not as sight. The space of the domestic scene is appropriated for and by the imagination, but not according to or in the service of the rationalizing eye of the market, since what is symbolized by a small painting tucked along a hallway between kitchen and

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<sup>19</sup> The importance of the few rescued items suggests that the subjective “space” evoked and experienced through these objects, though concretely rooted in the current structure, also contains the space of past homes. While the fire was an arbitrary judge as to which items might be retained by the Ratcliffe family, the situation here nevertheless indicates the importance of small, portable objects which are carried from place to place and installed to truly “domesticate” the new home, especially in a culture that is as itinerant as is the contemporary U.S. (The analogy of Aeneas taking up his family lares and penates as he fled burning Troy seems particularly appropriate.) This can certainly happen with larger works, but small works and objects together seem to be more effective in this regard, perhaps because they are reciprocal with the body, can be diffused through the house more effectively, and because many of the pivot points of daily practice provide small spaces and moments which can be enriched by fleeting contact with objects of the past. Large works, by contrast, which require more space not just in terms of a larger piece of wall (over the sofa, over the mantelpiece) but also a greater viewing distance to be fully seen, have until recently seemed more often than not to present challenges for those moving into new houses: “Where are we going to hang that?” On the other hand, I will argue in Chapter 7 that changes in residential building practices in Atlanta (and elsewhere) may be altering this dynamic to the detriment of this visual intimacy.

dining room is not ultimately “seeable,” even if it is best evoked in the mind by an object that pleases the eye. This is the meaning of Cicero’s assertion that we may possess “as if by seeing” what we can hardly embrace by thinking – or, for that matter, by verbalizing. And even though, as Bergmann argued from her work in Pompeii, visual images of objects housed in an imagined space are good at helping us fix intangible things in memory, it is interaction with the object/ images in specific social spaces that brings them and their associated meanings truly to life; therein lies the paradox that artworks removed from the abstract or formal realm to the concrete and quotidian one do not lose meaning and prestige, but rather gain it, since personal, family, even class identity and memory are intimately tied to objects and movements in the domestic setting.<sup>20</sup>

Out of the habitual experience of home and the practice of ordinary life arise moments that are intentionally set apart from the routine, even if they are predicated by it. That is to say that the usefulness and perceptual possibilities of “domesticated” artworks are not exhausted by their reflexive or quotidian roles,

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<sup>20</sup> Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton argued precisely that the emotional energy associated with the objects arranged about and lived with in the home constitute an “ecology” that not only connects the individual with the space, but with the individual’s own history and identity as a discrete person tied to family and the wider culture. Through regular interactions within the concrete arena of the house, possessions (frequently including what Bergmann called “inherited objects”) come to represent the family’s past, its own “legendary stories,” which members of a household rehearse with varying degrees of intentionality and attention: “The home is an empirical and normative entity, constituted through time by the objective patterns of psychic activity that people invest in different areas of the house, different objects, and in different activities. Thus the home is a goal or intention that becomes realized through the attention the inhabitants give to it. . . . But [it] is also an objective entity with its own “personality” which exerts a reciprocal influence on the individual family members. It represents the *gestalt* of the family and forms an essential part of the *social self* of the individual” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, p. 138).

because the artworks can also facilitate moments of subjective awareness, and in fact are “cultivated” for this purpose in much the same way as the physical fabric of the Roman villa was ordered and arranged to facilitate rhetorically structured appreciation and commemoration. In other words, artworks (sometimes quite ordinary ones) are often the catalysts for aesthetic experiences even in the midst of mundane settings and activities, and very often in the course of repeated, if not repetitive tasks. Stopping to sit and gaze at a painting may be the action elicited in the more formal space of a museum, but at home, where the paths of memory, history, and identity are well trodden and are made alive in the very treading, moments of aesthetic appreciation occur as pauses in the rhythm of the day, rather than dead stops.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard provides a particularly suggestive rendering of the richness inherent in this dynamic experience of the ordinary domestic space, in this combination of patterned-but-intentional movement and common yet almost-ritualized engagements with the objects of the home, and the connection of space and movement with memory and history when he states that such “housewifely” care “awakens furniture that was asleep.”<sup>21</sup> But this comment—also cited in the epigraph—and the passage that immediately precedes it also bring into the conversation two aspects that are essential to understanding the sense of a distinctive spatial/visual practice that marks intuitive vision: first, that even conventionalized activity and interaction with

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<sup>21</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 68.

furnishings may evoke an aesthetic response, and second, that “interaction with furnishings” is conventionally (even stereotypically, but no less accurately) associated with women as “housework.” Bachelard asks:

But how can housework be made into a creative activity? The minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture, or practice phenomenology while polishing a piece of old furniture, we sense new impressions come into being beneath this familiar domestic duty. For consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality of beginning to the most everyday actions. It even dominates memory. . . . [W]hen a poet rubs a piece of furniture . . . he creates a new object; he increases the object’s human dignity; he registers this object officially as a member of the human household. . . .<sup>22</sup>

What Bachelard called “housewifely care,” then, is the ongoing practice of cultivating the domestic environment as a means to cultivating the identity of those who live in it. And when we realize that the cultivation process is shaped by the environment it shapes, we get at the heart of intuitive vision understood as a way of living contemporary domesticity that is also the driving cultural logic behind the market for domestic painting: in Lefebvre’s trio of terms, these artworks are *representations of space* used to mediate *spatial practice* and make the domestic arena literally “come alive” as *representational space*. Intuitive vision is a dialectical way of engaging aesthetic objects in and as part of the intimate, well-known, yet always-becoming setting of the home, in which realization of qualities inherent to the work of art (as situated and experienced in its domestic

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<sup>22</sup>Bachelard, p. 67. While some may object that here the “housewifely” care lavished on the table in question is at the hands of a decidedly male poet, it should be noted that the passage continues (see epigraph) and concludes by giving the housewife herself credit for this kind of aesthetic experience. In any case, dusting has never before seemed so noble.

spatial context) evokes a new consciousness of the viewer's own situation in the social spaces of memory and relational identity, and which energizes the ongoing process of renewal of the home, too. Under its phenomenological regime, artworks literally bring into focus the role of domestic space as a container for identity formation and make it conceivable, re-presenting both the space and the patterns of dwelling that animate it to the inhabitant, and thereby helping it emerge and be expressed as the fully-lived representational space of "home."

Finally, the dynamic quality of the home that enables it to respond to evolving family identity through the addition and rearrangement of artworks as well as altered patterns of activity is also a built-in connection to the market not just for paintings but for all other manner of "home furnishings," too. That connection is a reminder that what I'm describing does not exist in the "ethnographic present" or somehow above or apart from consumer capitalism, but within and along-side it. Even though a home is much richer if it is "always becoming" rather than what Harrison White called "a component in the production process for finished space,"<sup>23</sup> the activity of symbolic renewal is superficially (and sometimes truly) indistinguishable from the dominant cycles of commodity consumption, and the robust economy of new decorative things is ever more inextricably bound with the habits of home making. This is not to discount the fact that women are the primary cultivators of the home as an

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<sup>23</sup> White, p. 159.

integrative space, or that their predominant orientation in seeking to make the home a place conducive to aesthetic experience is towards interpersonal connection and integration. But it does remind us that women desiring objects that are effective for these ends must seek them out in a social space that is also an economic one, evaluating and selecting among competing marketplaces and producers in order to find works that best exhibit the qualities required to help conjure and sustain intuitive vision.

*Figures for Chapter IV*

Figure 1



Barbara Mack: Untitled – pansies in blue and white vase, 1989.  
Watercolor on paper. 10 x 8 in.

In scale and handling, this work is prototypical of watercolor renderings of informal arrangements of familiar flowers in small vases, and reminiscent of works by Dora McDaniel, one of the Market's most popular and, indeed, well-loved artist.



Figure 2



Katherine Brown. Untitled botanical in blue and white pitcher, n.d.  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.

This painting hangs over a fireplace mantel in a master bedroom, with the porcelain figurines shown at the bottom of the image sitting on mantel itself.

Figure 3



Claudia Hartley. *Red Chair with hydrangeas*, ca. 1999.  
Acrylic on canvas. 16 x 20 in.

This image was featured on a post-card for a group exhibition of Atlanta artists (represented by Anne Irwin) at the Foxhall Gallery in Washington, D.C., in the Spring of 2000.

Figure 4



Katherine Brown. Untitled garden scene/portrait, before 1991.  
Oil on canvas. 20 x 16 in.

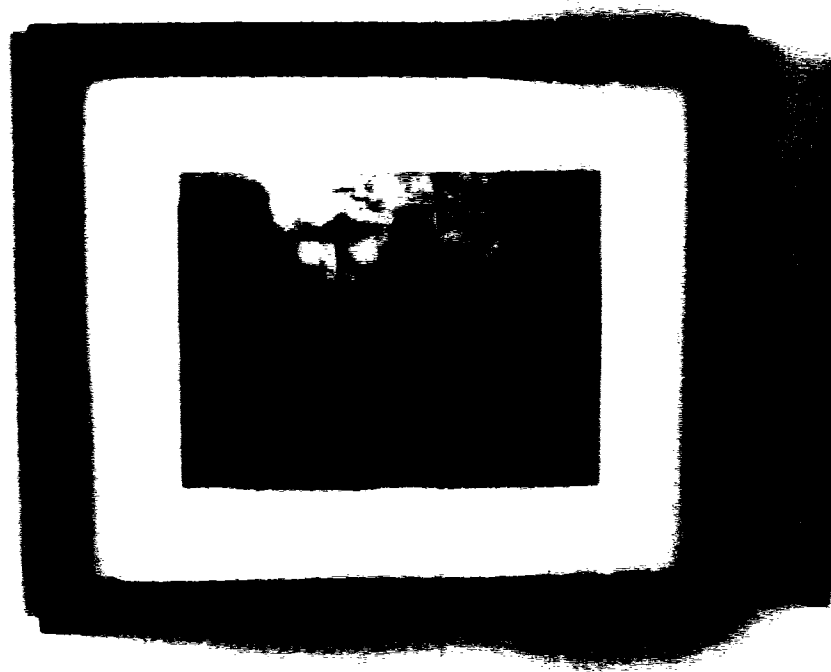
This painting is an informal portrait scene showing the owner in her own garden. Notice how the relationship between the artwork and the lamp helps to integrate the painting into its setting: The lampshade's color and shape echo the sunhat worn by the woman pictured, while the base of the lamp represents another leisure activity that might take place in a garden or back yard: swinging. The wall color is also complementary to the soft blue-greens in the background foliage, especially.

Figure 5



Benn Johnson. *Harbor scene with sailboats*, 1994  
Oil on canvas. 20 x 24 in.

Figure 6



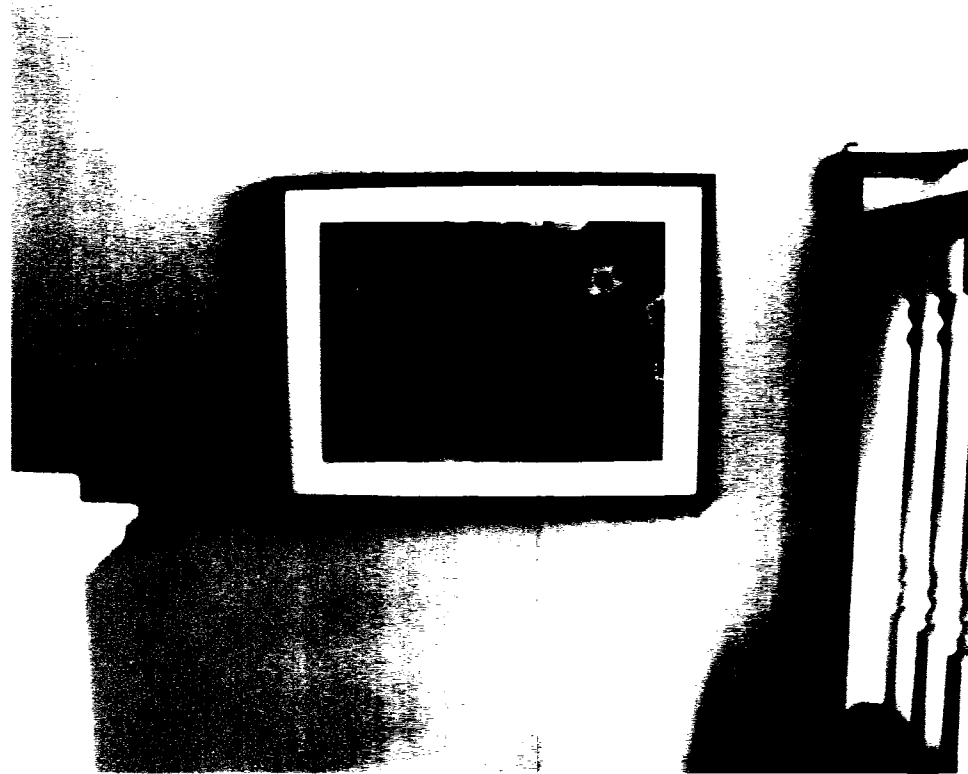
Framed postcard of Clifford Bailey's oil painting *Putting on the Ritz*, 2000, advertising the artist's exhibition at the Reed Gallery in Atlanta that same year. The postcard was framed and given to homeowner, Mrs. McGill, by the gallery owner, who was at the time of the gift dating McGill's co-worker.

Figure 7



This image shows the hallway/stairwell space in which the framed exhibition postcard hangs. The kitchen is through the doorway towards the rear of the house, while the dining room is behind the viewer. Mrs. McGill is pictured at the right-hand edge of the photo.

Figure 8



Holly McGill\*. *Beyond Prozac*, n.d.  
Acrylic on paper. 12 x 16 in.

Painted by the owner's adult daughter while she was still in high-school, this work hangs at the top of the stairwell where it is seen repeatedly by family members and friends invited up to the private areas of the house's second floor, though it is also visible from the living room on the main floor.

\*This work, alone, bears a pseudonym in place of the artist's real name, in order to protect hers and the identity of her parents.

Figure 9



A. E. Backus. Untitled Florida landscape, n.d. (ca. 1964).  
Oil on canvas. 20 x 24 in.

This painting was given to the homeowners as a wedding present by the bride's father, who was a friend and patron of the artist in Florida. The stem of the orchid in the foreground breaks into the pictorial space of the scene, connecting it with the physical space of the "Florida room" where it hangs. Notice that the care and even formality of this arrangement does not preclude using the countertop as a temporary repository for books, videos and other odds and ends of daily life.



Figure 10



*As seen from the kitchen window, the Florida landscape is reduced in apparent scale and integrated with the physical and emotional “background” of the room.*

Figure 11



In this scene, Rebecca Wood's silkscreen print, *Still Life with blue Cups* (Artist's proof IV), 1983 hangs next to the kitchen table, evoking the table itself as the site of shared meals and casual intimacy though it is just as often a staging ground for the day's other activities.

Figure 12



Portrait of the owner's dachshund (by the author, 2001. oil on panel. 6¼ x 6¼ in.), displayed on the kitchen countertop amid porcelain figurines, aquarium products, cell-phone chargers and bills.

Figure 13



Watercolor illustrated in Figure 1 is shown as part of and referencing the owner's collection of such porcelain dishes, displayed in the kitchen/family room of the home.

Figure 14



Another view of the kitchen/family-room pictured in Figure 13, showing the many other pieces of blue and white china on display. The wicker chair just visible in the lower right corner of the photo sits in front of the wicker desk shown in Figure 13.

Figure 15



The vignette of Czech watercolors discussed above is not visible in this view from the entry hall toward the living room, but hangs on the wall at left, over the chair and chest. The homeowner, Mrs. Ratliffe is pictured at center, looking at a bell-pull from her grandmother. The hallway to the right leads to the children's bedrooms.

Figure 16



This view is from bedroom hallway towards the Czech watercolors and the social center of the house. On the right are framed works by the family's children.

Figure 17



The complete ensemble includes souvenir watercolors from Prague, photos of the family's children, a ceramic house made by the third child, and the gilded bronze clock "restored" after a fire.



## CHAPTER V: Domestic Painting

[H]ousehold objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects as well as *shapes* the pattern of the owner's self.

--Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton  
*The Meaning of Things*, p. 17.

Everything in the house-- whether it's art, or good art, or great art--embodies something about a relationship, a connection.

--Gene McClure, homeowner

What makes my work appealing? I think [the things I paint] are just familiar items...What I paint appeals to buyers for the same reasons it appeals to me to paint it, I suppose. There's nothing unusual about what I do. And I think that I sell to people with similar backgrounds.

--Dora McDaniel, artist

Following on the previous chapter's discussion of artwork in specific home settings, *domestic painting* can be described as a body of works, aesthetic and spatial practices distinctively inscribed with *intuitive vision*. But domestic painting and the way that the symbolic space of interpersonal relationships is given concrete form through it do not exist solely within the confines of private homes but also in the marketplace for art in Atlanta. By definition, a market is a set of social and physical spaces in which labor or its products are exchanged between producers and consumers via intermediary people and mechanisms. Providing the right "goods" to fulfill the needs and desires of the consumer is a

main point of a market, but benefits flow back to the producer, as well; a self-sustaining market requires communication and reciprocity. In the domestic painting market, communication and reciprocity are not just preconditions for the exchange of artworks; they are one of the primary goals of that exchange and of the aesthetic experiences fostered by the artworks, themselves. This chapter describes the way that the social relationships of the marketplace reflect the interpersonal values of intuitive vision, still with the artworks as the central signs of connection and interrelation between people and spaces. Indeed, even some of the physical characteristics that fit artworks to intuitive vision in the home turn out to be signs of a remarkable homology, sympathy and connection between the women who fill the market roles of artists and buyers.

### *Integration*

In *The Meaning of Things*, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton took care to define both the meaning of “aesthetic experience” and the decidedly different ways in which men and women typically approach it vis-à-vis domestic objects. Briefly, the authors derive their sense of such experience from American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s distinctions between *recognition* and *perception*, according to which *recognition* is the appreciation of an object in wholly habituated and familiar (the person’s own) terms, “as something we already know,” while *perception* is an appreciation of an object for its own

inherent qualities and character, which it “imposes on the viewer” to “produce a new organization of feeling, attention, or intentions.” Even (perhaps *especially*) in the otherwise familiar and conventionalized context of the home, this sort of interaction with an aesthetic object “creates new insights” which contribute to a new and heightened sense of identity for the person having the aesthetic experience.<sup>1</sup> This description meshes nicely with the essentially dialectical relationship between ritual and novelty described by Bachelard – the confluence of ordinary and the extraordinary moments of consciousness that can occur even while polishing old furniture.

But Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton also address the different ends for which men and women seek these aesthetic experiences in the first place. They found that men most often sought such experiences for the sake of “differentiation” of themselves from their environment (interpersonal as well as physical), while women sought such transcendent moments to forge connections with and across relationships; they sought what the authors called “integration”:

Caring for people and preserving and nurturing relationships are still the tasks that are most valued by the women we studied. Therefore they prefer to interact with objects that act as tools for carrying out such activities. The things they cherish are signs of ties that bind the family together – shared experiences.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, pp. 44-45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118. The idea that the “cultivation of the self” through intentional interaction with objects in the home is the critical means by which personal and interpersonal goals (hence identity) are developed and expressed in contemporary Western culture is the central topic of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s work, and I can not give it justice in these short excerpts. In fact, though much of their argument – particularly about the gendered and class differences in how individuals relate to larger social structures like the family or local community – is applicable to this market, my point is not to analyze it from a sociological

This gendered difference has important ramifications for understanding the domestic painting market in Atlanta, for in every home I studied the responsibility for establishing and maintaining its aesthetic practices rested primarily on the woman of the house; and without exception, the artists most active in the marketplace were women, too. While intuitive vision describes a way of relating to the aesthetic objects in the home, it bears repeating that its women practitioners use it to help realize the home itself as the grounds and context for the *specifically relational* identity of its inhabitants – to integrate them with each other inside the home, and with friends and family outside it, as well. It is important not to lose sight of this goal of contemporary bourgeois interiors while looking at the habits and objects in them, because *integration*, understood not just in the specific terms of gender-differentiated aesthetic goals but in a more general sense of connectedness and wholeness – of the parts all fitting together – is the central term required for understanding both why artworks so effectively fulfill their role as domestic symbols and how artists and buyers in the domestic painting market communicate efficiently to satisfy the needs and goals of both.

My use of *integration*, therefore, encompasses not only the reason for seeking aesthetic experience via objects, but also how paintings and the objects pictured in them are integrated into the aesthetic environment of the home via

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perspective (though informed by one), but with an eye towards understanding different interpretations, instances, and ultimately hierarchies of “art” as a cultural category.

intuitive vision, and how artists, buyers and their intermediaries are connected by a common understanding of the roles of these art/objects as markers of relationship both inside and outside the home. Still more, the practices of looking at and for artworks with others and using paintings as gifts are also components of the creation of the works as symbolic markers of interpersonal connection. Finally, this common vision is undergirded by the fact that artists and buyers are also integrated with each other through concrete social networks that are not exclusively art-related but that overlap their roles in the market.<sup>3</sup> In other words, part of what makes domestic paintings especially good at producing integration in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's terms is the fact that the works are themselves produced and distributed in a consciously integrated (i.e., perception- and relationship-saturated) context.

In this network, the relationships between producers and consumers and distributors of artworks are not limited to their economically-defined market roles. A critical difference between the domestic painting market and avant-garde markets such as the one studied by Plattner, in which insulation of artists from all but a few well-screened buyers (and hence the marketplace, as such) is

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<sup>3</sup> While this fits all the requirements of Becker's (and to some extent even White's) definition of an "artworld," I will emphasize the subtle distinction between a social structure that is defined by the activities and relationships devoted to "high art" and that typically has connections and points of overlap with other self-conscious artworlds, and one for which the more important and significant (and also fairly seamless) connections are with cultural fields that have little to do with "high arts" as they are often understood in contemporary American culture. While this would perhaps not be a significant distinction to Becker, who went to great pains to avoid value judgments about art, for White, Plattner, and others committed to an avant-garde ideal of art, a preferential affinity to "non-art" over consecrated artworlds would be meaningful, as it dilutes the central claim of art's autonomy from consumer capitalist culture.

essential and a key purpose of intermediaries like galleries. Here it is striking the extent to which artists and non-artists live similar and even intersecting lives outside of their differing market roles, though they may come from significantly divergent backgrounds. These are by no means interchangeable lives, but it is not unusual for artists and buyers to go to the same churches, have husbands who work together, and have children attending the same schools and participating in the same activities outside of school. Moreover, both artists and buyers are aware of their similarities, something suggested by the painter's comment about what makes her art appealing, cited in the epigraph.<sup>4</sup> The same artist told of taking her daughter and a car-load of other girls to a summer camp in Alabama, where she was introduced to another mother who immediately recognized her name and told her that she loved the artist's work. Indeed, parenting as an arena of connection may be among the most significant areas of lifestyle overlap, since all other responsibilities aside (including creating artworks or other employment), these women tend to be responsible for the maintenance of the family home and the nurturance of the people who live in it,

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<sup>4</sup> Interview 14 (1995). Other connections between artists and the buyers of their artworks ranged from the intensely personal to the casual: one woman became acquainted with the work of a now-favorite artist while being treated by the painter's husband for a serious illness (Interview 12 (1995)), several others bought art from alumnae of their colleges, and benefit auctions for their own or their children's *alma maters* were popular venues in which art and social integration could be explicitly tied. As another indicator that interpersonal connection is a key component in the meaning of artworks (and sometimes the impetus for their purchase), most of the relationships mentioned to me by informants were offered without specific prompting, but as part of the "story" of how the work came to be in the house.

especially the children – responsibilities that continue to be strongly associated, if not actually synonymous, with bourgeois domesticity and femininity.

In fact, it is the rule rather than the exception that for some time in their lives these painters must have fit their career schedules around the requirements of child-rearing, both on the daily scale of painting while the children are in school, and on the scale of years, as several interrupted early careers painting and teaching art long enough to have and raise children to school age. For others (including Mrs. Irwin), the prospect of children approaching college-age was an additional impetus to pursue the business of art with more determination, as an additional (not just “supplemental”) source of income. And as some artists also teach painting to children whose parents own pieces of their work, artists are sometimes directly involved with the cultivation of others’ children as well as their own, making them “fellow-workers” with their peers on several levels. While working as artists promises women significant flexibility for domestic duties (especially in markets like this one where epithets like “Sunday painter” are rarely wielded to peremptorily curtail a woman’s opportunities for advancement), we should also not overlook the fact that some of the other part-time careers favored by and/or open to women are similarly geared towards producing and personalizing the literal fabric of domesticity: interior design and residential real estate. But, because even those for whom the art market is either livelihood or passion do not (or can not) make it their sole or even predominant

source of interpersonal relationships, the extent that women across the marketplace are integrated by their attention to aesthetics is subsumed by their interconnection through these other, still home-related avenues. The unifying character of the domestic painting marketplace is that its aesthetic emerges from and is charged with the task of giving form to this very culture of integrated domesticity.

Using Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's term "integration" not just for the goals of aesthetic experience in the home but for how making and buying art fits into the whole lives of those involved in the culture and business of domestic painting suggests a way around the seeming contradiction between the personal identity-creation and more generally-understood "aesthetic" (not to say "decorative") uses of artworks, a tension apparent in the following citation from their work:

One would expect that the reasons given for the special attraction of Visual Art objects would pertain to their beauty, originality, aesthetic value, or the artist's skills; in short, with the intrinsic qualities of the picture. . . . [But] people pay particular attention to pictures in their homes because in doing so they relive memorable occasions and pleasing relationships. Of course, the interesting question is why pictures rather than appliances, let us say, or other things, serve this purpose so frequently. Perhaps something peculiar to a work of visual art enhances these experiences. The qualities invested by painters in their work, the order they bring to their paintings, presumably act as catalysts for attracting and directing the viewer's attention toward pleasant memories. Or, possibly, appropriate moods and sentiments are released because of the cultural conventions attributed to art."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, p. 65.



In the domestic painting market these two poles of the meaning of artworks are neither diametrically opposed nor even contradictory, but mutually supporting. The visual order brought to paintings by the artists doesn't just attract and direct attention to pleasant memories, but through intuitive vision actually brings order to the space of memories (the home) and emphasizes its role as the space of identity where relational ties are lived out. Artworks' integration into domestic space and practice via reflexivity and quotidianity makes them symbolically relevant and significant, even as they make the social space conceivable. To reiterate the connection between Cicero and Csikszentmihalyi, the latter's "something peculiar to a work of visual art" is precisely what makes artworks better than appliances for enhancing relational memories, because the explicitly perceivable "visuality" of a painting is what allows it to stand for otherwise formless things like emotions and memories that are difficult to perceive through our primary senses. Thus, it is precisely the role of aesthetic experiences conjured by paintings to amplify and fix in the mind those relational memories and connections; as I argued in the last chapter, it is the phenomenological space of the house that these works represent and of which they become part that is key to understanding what they do. Conversely, the emotional terrain of the house informs the physical arrangement of rooms that help focus residents' attention on the intrinsic qualities of artworks. Whatever their physical attributes, paintings can effectively represent rooms as

containers for identity because the artworks' aesthetic qualities are arrayed in and integrated with the already personality-saturated space of the home.

### *Smallness, Subjectivity, Style*

There are certainly specific physical characteristics of artworks that enable them to be easily integrated into the material culture of these private houses, some of which I have already touched upon in my description of intuitive vision. I suggested how shallow pictorial space serves the reflexive "mirror" function of these paintings in their rooms, and that conventionally beautiful colors likewise allow the works to be included in (or the basis of) a decorative scheme. But telling us more about the complexity and richness (not to mention pervasiveness) of *integration* are the concrete features of artworks that not only fit them into the home but also simultaneously speak of the social integration required by and sought in the marketplace, and even of the specific part that artists' agency is expected to play. The style in which artworks are executed is a dual-purpose marker of this sort, and the objects and places that get pictured also bear additional explication in this context; but a good place to begin is by describing the unexpected social virtues of physical smallness.

The very act of looking at an artwork small enough to be placed on a desk or chest of drawers, on a bookshelf or in a narrow hall requires an intimacy with the painting; one must come close to it to see – all the more to engage – the

objects or space it represents. Typically inviting rather than demanding the attention of viewers, it is a principle feature rather than a byproduct that small paintings can be tucked into the many informal spaces of the house as easily as they can be placed in its more formal and public rooms, and may even be moved from one setting to another without causing a major stir. Smallness aids in integration of the work into the home, and is well suited to the way paintings are experienced under intuitive vision. But smallness facilitates the additional role of artworks being a “relational currency” that signifies aesthetic experience in the service of integration. The fact that small paintings are often relatively inexpensive and transportable means that their potential in both roles is often realized. Because purchasing a small work requires a relatively small (but still not insignificant) investment of both economic and emotional capital, they are an important part of the social *practice* of integration, not only being bought for a woman’s own home, but given as gifts, tokens of relational experiences, or ways to support and “appreciate” friends and peers (including the artist). The copy from one of Mrs. Irwin’s gallery announcements indicates the expectation that friendship and the business of art overlap, but also that the scale of small artworks has a direct correlation to the range of relationships that they be used to mark:

For the patrons and friends of Anne Irwin Fine Art, “The Small Works Show” has become a holiday tradition – an opportunity to start an

art collection for a child, give just the perfect small painting to a loved one or add to one's own collection.<sup>6</sup>

Especially on family vacations, but also on outings with other women friends, the object of shopping often isn't handbags or clothes, but artworks and other personal items for the home, which then become mementos of the time spent with their friends and relations. Artworks are not just a sign of relationship, but an actual medium of exchange – marking specific relationships and moments in their histories by being placed in the buyer's own home or by being given away to be placed in another's home, a finding consistent with Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's that artworks are the primary markers for "Non-Kin relationship."<sup>7</sup> The process of finding and buying art, then, like the practice of experiencing it in the home, becomes a rehearsal of integration – the process reflects the goal and intention of forging relational bonds.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From an announcement of the 2001 version of this annual show (six years after the initial fieldwork for this study), the language of this description (using words like "patron" and "collection") conforms to the practice of more "professional" artworlds coinciding with the opening of a new, more traditionally commercial gallery-like space than Irwin's previous venues. These terms seem to hold an uneasy truce with the language that suggests the relational potential for small-scale artworks, announcing the pressures of assimilation and dissolution that are brought to bear on the domestic painting market and its practices – the subject of the next chapter.

<sup>7</sup> Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, p.65

<sup>8</sup> This aspect is not limited to small works exclusively, especially when the relationships being negotiated are those within a single household. Thus, the mother of one family related how finishing a renovation of their home involved the whole family going on art-looking outings to galleries and other venues, "trying out paintings" for the room. In the end, the chosen work was a compromise between several members and their tastes, but what the painting came to represent to them all was the very process of negotiating and searching as a family, the creation of a family aesthetic, and a marker of the maturing children's new, more significant place in family decision-making. The painting became a work about looking for an aesthetic object to represent the family dynamic itself.

Small paintings are not disposable goods by any means, either, for their “relative inexpensiveness” does not discount the fact that artworks of any size still carry a premium price compared to other decorative goods: a framed 9”x12” original oil painting might cost from \$200-\$500, while a similarly-sized print of a watercolor might fetch from \$65-\$225 depending on whether and how it is framed. How dear these prices seem to a given buyer also depends on her own stage in life and affluence, but even for those who can and do afford larger paintings for their own homes, small paintings and prints remain the favored way to bestow the rich meanings associated with artwork on a friend, as both communication and emblem of their relationship, without inducing an excessive or burdensome expectation of reciprocity.<sup>9</sup> Moreover – and as was repeated many times in my interviews – taste in artwork is considered a very personal and subjective thing, and buying art for someone else is, therefore, a risky

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<sup>9</sup>Even if not given as a gift, a painting with a high price-tag runs the risk of having its so-called “investment value” compete with its value as a symbol of interpersonal integration. This helps explain why the artist exhibition histories and related material common in avant-garde markets are often absent where domestic paintings are sold. There remains an uneasy balance in the market between assurances offered that this or that artwork is by a *bona fide* artist whose commitment to her career or record of past sales can help justify the high price paid for the work (especially of larger paintings that may run into the tens of thousands of dollars) and use of terms such as “investment value,” which suggest that the painting might be re-sold for a profit later, or that simply put too large an emphasis on monetary value (appropriate to “products”), rather than the work’s value as a component in the creation of the domestic/relational aesthetic. For artists who specialize in small works, selling enough art to meet their economic needs means either raising the prices into this dangerous realm, or risking saturating the market with many lower-priced works, like prints. This is similar to the problem faced by avant-garde artists who want to justify high prices for their works without recourse to market-based, commercial rationales, but in the domestic painting context the problem is also experienced by the home-maker who risks investing one singular object with too much emotional and monetary capital, when it is the very dynamism and multi-faceted/multi-object nature of the home environment that allows it to so well represent the identity of the residents as a collective of individuals.

proposition unless one knows the recipient and her tastes with some intimacy. Giving an artwork is a statement of one's own tastes, but one to be offered rather than imposed on the recipient. In the best cases, even if the giver's choice does not "match," those of the recipient, the relationship is such that aesthetics can be a ground for something akin to "negotiation and compromise," but with the opposite of those terms' adversarial connotations. Giving artwork as a gift is "giving of oneself" (one's own tastes and sensibilities) in a dynamic that marks out a common, collaborative interpersonal space through aesthetics. This is why receiving a gift of art that elicits "I love it! It's perfect!" is thought to be so marvelous for both the giver and recipient, but also why the smallness of object and investment offers safety in cases where that level of familiarity and identification has not been reached; there is no great loss if the painting isn't "perfect," and the personal and intimate nature of the giver's intentions remains undiminished.

One of the ways a giver can increase her chances of having an artwork appreciated on its own intrinsic merits as well as for the relationship it represents is to choose a work that pictures something known to be cherished by the recipient: a beloved china pattern, perhaps, or flowers from the woman's own garden, or the landscapes of leisure that signify time away from jobs and devoted to family and friendship: the mountains or the coastal lowlands and beaches of Georgia and the Carolinas. As treacherous are the waters of personal

taste in art, compared to the extreme diversity of objects considered art across contemporary American culture as a whole, the domestic painting market offers something of a safe harbor to its participants in the form of a common vocabulary of subjects. An available repertoire with which both parties are familiar makes the sort of negotiation of an interpersonal aesthetic mentioned above much easier. Yet the perpetuation of the market as genre depends on the correlation of the aesthetic desires, goals, and symbols not just between buyers who use paintings as relational currency, but between buyers and the artists who 'coin the expressions' used. Where others have stressed the ability of buyers to make their own meanings from the signs produced by artists with whom they have no direct connection, in the domestic painting market there are not only avenues through which artist and buyers communicate directly, but the belief that *sympathy* (more than merely "understanding") between the intentions of artist and the consumer of the work is essential to investing pictures of ordinary objects and familiar scenes with significant meaning.<sup>10</sup>

In the last chapter I stated that one of the most common means of representing the relational practice that fills and animates the physical space of the rooms of a house is to picture small personal items used in that very space and practice: tea cups and other items of "collectible" china, often paired with

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<sup>10</sup> Halle, for instance, emphasized the viewer's ability and penchant for making meaning through art completely independently from the intentions or concerns of the artist, while White (echoing Bourdieu) focused on the communication between fellow-producers as the principal component in establishing the field of possibilities available to artists working within a genre, whether they remain inside it or challenge the boundaries in the role of maverick.

flowers. Images of relational spaces themselves – especially tables set for breakfast or tea with these same dishes and flowers – even more explicitly picture the domestic practice that gives life to domestic space. Indeed, the fact that someone would desire a painting of a domestic scene that is already “right there” suggests the richness of objects as markers for practical identity. And because such small items and settings are likely to be in a woman’s home already and already suggest reciprocal friendship and dwelling in the home and its environs, they are signs that can be freely adopted and adapted to the specific interpersonal transaction required. Yet it is not enough that the object (or room) be literally re-pictured; a photograph will not do the same work as a painting. It is through the intervention of *artifice* – the “work” of art – that the role of things is made visible and focused; in other words, it is on account of the agency of the artist that paintings confirm and amplify ordinary objects’ capacity to carry meaning in the domestic environment. This is why it is imperative that artists and buyers be linked by a common understanding of what is being represented: that home is most essentially the space of subjects rather than objects.

The aesthetic effort assumed to be imbued into the work (what makes it a “work of art” as opposed to “product,” in fact) is taken to be analogous to the work of collecting the pieces pictured – the living it took to get them. Thus the artist represents objects in the same way I described small paintings, above: the concrete results and markers of relational activities, in every case more than



products. In fact, when artists use (picture) common but highly appreciated household objects as the medium through which to apply their own identity and subjectivity, the cultural associations with art and artists go directly to assuaging any nascent fears about having one's identity represented at home by consumer products, since the gift of the artist is to mark the elevation of the thing from the mundane into the realm of beauty and meaning – the aesthetic. A painting of a plate that echoes a real plate hanging on the wall above or adjacent to it says of both, “this is not *just* a plate.” While the artist does not exactly ennoble the material good, she does make its value to the resident visible and tangible through the gift of exceptional subjectivity attributed to her under the romantic ideology of art.<sup>11</sup>

One of what Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton called the “cultural associations attributed to art” and to artists is that the creative process be about fixing amplified moments of identity for the artist. In the domestic painting market, these moments can also be assumed and claimed by the viewer as *her* own because the artist and viewer are assumed to be significantly alike, particularly in their understanding of the role of objects and representations in

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<sup>11</sup> Concomitantly, women in this market expect objects obviously imbued with artistic agency and displayed in the home to have personal relevance to the residents of the house. One informant steeped in the domestic painting genre (though now a residential real estate agent, she had “helped out” during Ann Irwin’s early home-shows and at her first gallery space, taking payment in the form of paintings), recounted seeing a collection of African masks on the wall of a home she was arranging to sell. When she asked the owner about them, expecting to hear that they were acquired on a family trip to Africa or that the owners had a special interest in the art of that continent, she was “disgusted” to be told, “Oh, no, the decorator just found them somewhere and hung the whole collection.”

the home. This is not to discount the quality of *difference* attributed to and expected from those with artistic gifts, though, because artists are assumed to possess special “unique” talents for the mechanical processes of making paintings, but even more for “seeing” and “expressing,” all of which they share with their peers. For non-artist buyers in the marketplace, the role of the artist is not “to say something I would never think of,” but “to say what I feel more clearly and more eloquently than I could say it.” Art and artist are to speak for the viewer, not just to her. As with those in avant-garde markets, artists in the domestic painting market are allowed personal idiosyncrasies and a degree of divergence from social norms in return for sharing their gifts with non-artists, though such divergence is often expressed as by the poles of shyness (or humility) and unusual exuberance, rather than an extreme devotion to craft, much less isolation. In this social and ideological context, it makes little sense to establish “difference” as a goal of art (or artists) in and of itself, when the point of aesthetic experience is to establish connection and commonality.

Along these same lines, it should be noted that there is an important difference between this dynamic in which the artist’s special vision validates symbolic goods and that claiming *any* object treated by the artist becomes *ipso facto* “art-worthy.” What is happening, after all, is not the reclamation or aestheticization of an otherwise despised object, hence a statement of the power of the artist to unilaterally valorize the base and mundane. Though still a

recognition of the artist's ability to instill an aura of special meaningfulness through her work, what she is thought to depict is the emotional and cultural weight already associated with the object by its owner (often, of course, the artist herself) in sympathy with the viewer and her own similar associations with her own similar belongings and spaces. Conversely, the viewer doesn't re-appropriate the aura for her own (different) use, but trusts that the meaning she finds in the work is the same one the artist was intending. Both individuals are assumed to understand the role of objects in the home and the capacity of art to represent it; thus, the relational transaction that occurs between artist and the recipient of a work of her art is parallel to that described above between a woman and the friend to whom she gives an intimately-scaled painting, emblematic of her own subjectivity.

In practice, a primary indicator of the artist's agency being applied to the emblems and spaces of domesticity is *style*; it is the concrete and visible evidence that art has intervened between identity and commodity. Style argues that "the glimmer of consciousness" really has been applied to an everyday object or collection of objects or vacation view so that these can serve as markers of identity without reducing the identity of the person to that of "consumer," "tourist" or even "owner," thus defined by the commodity (including the landscape) itself. The agency and subjectivity of the artist expressed through signs of workmanship like composition (especially phenomenological

perspectives), paint handling, and color choice goes to highlight the process of seeing and the materiality of the artwork itself, rather than that of the commodity pictured, though these are linked. Indeed, the concrete elements of style I'm talking about here are closely related to the genre's conventions for depicting the social *use* of things and spaces rather than their materiality.

Another common (if seemingly paradoxical) way of depicting use rather than materiality is the near absence of figures actually pictured using the things and spaces. This strategy freely allows imaginative repopulation of the depopulated landscape by the viewer's own self and family. So it may be even more correct to say that what is pictured in these works is a rich and literally unlimited *potential* for relational use, which can be realized in new and different ways depending on new physical and personal-historical situations in the house. This reading also allows that the intrinsic qualities of the work are themselves re-appreciated during successive, re-newed experiences that are fully "aesthetic" in Dewey's terms.

But style, itself, serves a unifying function when applied to spaces (and their physical contents) in and around the home, giving them status as objects appropriate to be invested with agency and intentionality by the labor of the artist. When rooms as containers for practice become the subject of paintings, they are usually represented with loosely interpreted perspective and with spatial boundaries that focus attention on the "here and now" while diminishing

obvious continuity with other architectural spaces that might have been implied within the pictorial space. In other words, there are seldom views through interior doors or down hallways into other rooms. On the other hand, non-architectural background space is often allowed; even though they violate the tendency against allusions to depth, paintings that show patios or other “garden rooms” (such as that shown in *Figure 18*) are a particularly appropriate (and popular) subject for this sort of depiction. Not only are such hybrid spaces common in Atlanta and the South as settings for informal, intimate social interaction, but in addition to the usual tables, chairs, and vases, their “furnishings” include patches of sky or trees and flowers that are signs of the mediated Nature of the garden, just as likely to be cultivated by the woman of the house as is the interior with its relationships. Additionally, these shapes and textures combine well with the energetic, expressionist paint-handling that is the rule for this kind of painting because it suggests the emotional charge of the scene and the artist, herself. Of course, these stylistic choices also focus attention on the picture surface, itself, and therefore on the painting as an aesthetic object in its own right (and in its own room) while bringing to the fore (again) the agency of the artist.

The emotional charge sought from images of rooms is most often described as “happy,” “cheerful,” or, as the brochure for the painter of the

painting in Figure 1 says of herself, “enthusiastic!”<sup>12</sup> These are all states easily associated with bright colors and vigorous, “exciting” brushwork. But softer handling is more often linked with images that evoke intimacy and peacefulness, and for which the highest praise is to be called “beautiful,” but which the less-important sounding “pretty” is nearly equivalent. There are also certainly intermediary cases (and artists who produce both sorts of work) such as that shown in *Figure 19*, in which the application of the artist’s personality to a simplified and iconic landscape scene via loose brush work and heightened colors suggests a more explicitly symbolic meaning than the garden interiors, still interpreted as supporting and picturing the centrality of “home.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the softer set of paintings include most of the paintings of china discussed so far and many of those showing flowers arranged in a vase of some sort, but otherwise contextualized, whether in watercolor or the more formal medium of oil. Especially in the case of oils, the soft mediation of the artist’s hand lends gravity and richness to the depictions of the everyday object, commensurate with the importance placed on moments of intimacy within the family and among friends. But in all these cases (which are all typically grouped under the title of Impressionism in artist’s brochures and announcements of shows), the obvious

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<sup>12</sup> Claudia Hartley brochure, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> In a slight reversal of the usual dynamic of artwork amplifying the relational use of its space, in this case the small painting offers symbolic refuge from the drudgery of paying bills and doing other business correspondence in the very space where those activities occur, reinvigorating the owner’s awareness of the reason (continuity of the home) that those tasks are necessary. It is perhaps telling that the Mediterranean landscape and building pictured do not principally call up for the owner associations of exotic locales, but instead, an intense sense of domestic refuge and retreat. (Interview 59, (2003)).

expression of the artist's mind and hand is assumed to be evidence of an ultimately familiar subjectivity applied to known symbols in imaginative and pleasing, if not surprising ways. In contrast to avant-garde ideology's emphasis on originality, a much more common term of admiration for the artist's skill and vision in the domestic painting market is "creativity," while "original" is used almost exclusively to mark the distinction between singular works by integrated artists and commercially mass-produced pictures.

Since appropriate subjects are implicitly agreed upon, as is the importance of certain aesthetic values (beauty, for instance) and even the set of emotional states that are being sought (happiness, peacefulness, intimacy), the inscription of meaning through art is a process of cooperation between the artist and viewer, rather than either a statement of the artist's independent genius or a freeform appropriation by the purchaser. Nevertheless, the special role of the artist in this collaborative effort is accepted as critical. Rather than projecting their own radical autonomy by making something new, artists in this market are implicitly charged with helping the familiar thing be seen with new eyes – enabling viewers to have, in short, an aesthetic experience based on already-known objects as symbols. The Impressionist styles so familiar in the marketplace are the visual clues that signify the creativity and agency of the artist herself, and that she has accepted her part of the integrative aesthetic compact. Indeed, in line with the fact that painters in this market are as likely to mention Post-

Impressionist painters like Vlaminck and Matisse as their stylistic forebears as they are to name Monet, Renoir, or even Cassatt, their claim of continuity with these earlier artistic movements ultimately has less to do with technical similarities than with the desire of the artists to picture the look and feel, the objects and spaces and practices, of the contemporary life they share with their peers in class, gender and geography.

### *Authenticity*

For all its rich connotations – what it promises about the integration of the artist and buyer, of the buyer and her intimates, of the artwork and its subjects in the domestic space – *style* remains only an imperfect, superficial guarantee that the artist’s subjectivity is of a kind with that of the buyer. Indeed, integration of the artist and buyer in a common cultural milieu is part of the allure of contemporarily and locally-produced “original” artworks because it offers an assurance that the objects and places pictured really are indicators and symbols of interpersonal integration rather than either the pervasiveness of the consumer economy or the capricious individuality of the artist, or both.<sup>14</sup> Thus the aesthetic quality (or perhaps, capacity) of an artwork in this context does not rest solely on

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<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the difference in intention is not immediately and securely apparent in the strictly visual qualities of the painting, leading to the danger that style becomes empty and lifeless, that its look can be “faked.” Several women to whom I spoke expressed concern (and one made an accusation) that there were a few cynical artists mimicking the style of this “integrative aesthetic” in the marketplace, one drawing on her husband’s connections to the social network (not necessarily friendships) to aggrandize herself and literally “cash in.” Here, the opprobrium was for the betrayal (and cheapening) of the peer-relational basis of the market rather than for the idea of making money by selling to friends. (Interviews 14 and 21 (1995)).



its tangible characteristics but also on the degree to which the object is believed to be a true or *authentic* expression of the artist's shared sense of the meaning and purpose of domesticity. Authenticity is a bridge between the qualities of integration that pertain to the objects of the market (paintings and the things and spaces they picture) and those aspects of integration that pertain to the people (connection, interrelation, homology); it is the buyer's measure of trust that the works are truly integrative in nature.

So how is authenticity, itself, judged? Again, the somewhat circular answer depends on integration of the specific people and objects in question. The most trustworthy assurance of authenticity comes from proximate knowledge of the artist's integrity (so much richer a term when used here), either through personal acquaintance or through the assurance of a friend who, in turn, knows the artist. In fact, this sort of assurance seems to be sufficient even through two or three "degrees of separation" between buyer and artist, probably because such assurances are usually accompanied by redundancy: it is likely that at least two friends will have a connection to the artist, often through different avenues (church, or their children's school), diminishing the likelihood that relational distance will obscure nefarious aesthetic or commercial intent. When there is personal knowledge, often the key to trustworthiness is the fact that the buyer perceives the artist to be more or less, "like me." Not in every way, as I explained above, but enough that they can be expected (or shown) to find the

same scenes and spaces filled with the same promise of friendship. Here also, just as in avant-garde markets, the artist's representative and gallery-owner serves as an intermediary between the artist and the buyer, but not to achieve insulation and isolation of often-incompatible aims, but to assure each side that their aims *are* compatible. And of course the efficacy of the intermediary's assurance depends on her reputation as being integrated and sympathetic, too.<sup>15</sup>

Yet for all the danger of appearances, the visual qualities of the work itself—first in the context in which it is being offered for sale, then in the home—are still the primary and most powerful argument as to its authenticity; investigation of its social aspects typically follow after judgment based on a painting's immediately appreciable qualities. In this regard, the old adage may be amended to “the proof is in the putting,” as the very process of bringing a domestic painting home and putting it in place will reveal whether the work is a successful catalyst for the combination of personal intentions, spatial practice and ideology that make up the bourgeois home. The following chapter deals extensively with the way competing visualities in the places artworks are sold have come to exacerbate the difficulty of expressing and judging authenticity even in the privacy of home, but the concluding paragraphs of this chapter illustrate in detail the extent to which objects in the home, their representation

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<sup>15</sup> Intermediaries are also understood to represent an economic division of labor in the marketplace by taking on the sales (distribution) role for the artists; but they do not do so primarily because selling one's own work is seen to be inherently antithetical to making art, but because it frees the artist to make more authentic works.

through artwork, the relationships they symbolize, and the spaces of the domestic painting market can still be successfully integrated with each other, and how all of these together contribute to aesthetic experiences that lead towards interpersonal integration of the women in the market.

The oil painting shown in *Figure 20* is small (roughly 9" by 12" without its frame, roughly 17" x 20" with it) and centers on a blue and white china teapot filled with red and pink nasturtiums. Tucked just behind and partially hidden by the central pot are two empty teacups, also blue and white, but not in a pattern that exactly matches the teapot. All of these sit on a tablecloth with reddish dots within a reticulated, predominantly blue and white pattern. Finally, a slightly mottled sunny yellow plane of a wall is placed close behind this visually-unified ensemble of porcelain and flowers, flattening the pictorial space in which the china sits. The style is fairly realistic, but with a quasi-Impressionist looseness to the paint handling; a balance is maintained between the suggestion of "accuracy" in the form, colors and textures of the objects pictured, and touches of brushwork that emphasize the artist's hand and agency in producing a subjective depiction of the vignette.

Several of the visual elements of the depicted space and objects contribute to a sense of intimacy and privacy projected by the painting, beginning with how the high outside edges of the carved and textured frame lead the eye towards the painting, and continuing with the way attention is focused within the image,

itself. The horizon formed by the line between the tablecloth and the yellow background is not flat, but curves up slightly at the outside edges; similarly, the pattern of the tablecloth is not strictly rendered but follows this same slight curve, echoing the roundness of the central teapot-as-vase and accentuating that the point of view is from a point just above and looking slightly down onto/into the scene. The background wall is also slightly darker at its edges, with a roughly circular bright patch centered on (and, it would seem, lying behind) the flowers' center of mass. Together these features seem to focus the eye on the central vase. Yet the edge of the painting (defined here by the line of the frame) cuts off the uppermost flowers and denies a viewer's eye unimpeded passage around it, shifting visual movement down along the curving lines formed by the outside of the pot, itself. This alternate path suggests a slight de-emphasis of the apparently-central floral arrangement, allowing the spaces *around* the pot to become more important. The bright spot of yellow visible center-right – between leaves immediately above the pot's spout – also leads the eye past the pot and the flowers in it and into the implied space behind it, between the two tea-cups. The cups themselves are not arranged formally with silverware at the ready, but they also lack attendant evidence of a finished meal (used spoons, etc.); they and their moment are not "used up," but retain a certain simple and ongoing dignity. In fact, it is this space that can be considered the true subject of the work, suggesting a story with which a viewer attuned to its symbols of domesticity and

friendship will be entirely familiar and into which they are likely to place themselves. In a culture where the offer of a cup of tea in fine china is still a common (even *quotidian*) and welcome sign of both hospitality and friendship, the space between the two cups – obvious, but also discretely shielded by the flowers in the foreground – stands for the private and identity-filled space between the women who might have just shared their contents.

While this reading is consistent with the way artworks are experienced and explained in the homes I studied, one leg of my argument that this is a market integrated on multiple levels rests upon a correlation between this (standing for a buyer's) interpretation and the intentions of the artist; put another way, it is fair to ask the question, "might a teacup be just a teacup?" Going further, one might well ask whether the artist's intentions (much less agreement between them and the viewer's understanding) really matters as much as I have argued; what seems to be a significant reversal of the priorities common to avant-garde oriented art markets is really just the primacy of practical end-user valuations, in line with Halle's assertions about the limited importance of artists in the consumption of art. But in fact, the pervasive desire for *authenticity* in domestic paintings is an indication that the intentions of the artist *do* very much matter here, both for the sake and support of the artist as presumed fellow-worker and for the buyer seeking help in forging an integrative aesthetic environment. And this, again, is where it is important that artists and buyers not

only perceive themselves in integrated social and relational terms rather than according to such dichotomies as artist/non-artist or painter/patron, but also have evidence (or existing relationships) that supports these perceptions.

In this case, the buyer of the work, Mrs. Sally Smith, did in fact have a longstanding friendship with artist Kathy Brown that was intertwined with but not predicated on their relationship through art. Roughly the same age, the two women had their initial meeting at church when the artist first moved to town, and it was there that the two became friends; in the course of this friendship Mrs. Smith came to appreciate Mrs. Brown's talents. Still relatively early in their relationship, she had staged a show in her home for Mrs. Brown to introduce her to her own friends and potential customers, and the exhibition had, indeed, helped establish the painter in the community as well as the marketplace, not to mention cemented the friendship between the two.<sup>16</sup>

Over the intervening years Mrs. Smith had purchased and commissioned several other works from the artist (portraits of her children among them), delighting in both the objects themselves and the opportunity to support her friend, especially through difficult personal times. Kathy Brown, in turn, had given Mrs. Smith several small works as gifts. But all along the way, the lives of the two were connected through other social venues than just art-related ones (at one time the artist's husband gave tennis lessons to the Smiths' children, for

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<sup>16</sup> Interviews 4 (1995) with Katherine Brown, and 50 (unrecorded, 1995) and 61 (2003). With Mrs. Smith..

instance), and Mrs. Smith disavows any particular expertise in art. The relationship has remained one of sympathetic peers and mutually-supportive friends, lacking the socially unequal character that is often associated with “benefactor” patron/artist or artist/collector arrangements, though it has not been without misunderstandings.

The connection between the relationship and its literal visualization through the work is evident in Mrs. Smith’s description of her first impression of the painting and the flood of associations about her friendship with the artist that were triggered by the objects pictured and the specific relational space they represented to her:

It was an impulse buy. When I saw the painting, I just thought of all times we had had lunch together and all the times I had tea with Kathy out of those very cups. The vase and the flowers . . . it just reminded me of our friendship. And I knew I could put it anywhere.<sup>17</sup>

The first and last comments in this quote call to mind that the smallness of artworks provides multiple advantages in this market, from limiting the monetary investment required to make use of an artwork as relational currency (thus making this use more likely) to enabling the work to be placed and used in a variety or succession of spaces within the home. In fact, this painting has evoked friendship in more than one specific spatial context since it was purchased, having been only recently moved from Mrs. Smith’s bedroom to a new location no less filled with markers of her integrated identity, and no less

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<sup>17</sup> Interview 61 (2003).

(though differently) private and intimate. The renovation of her house included the addition of a “guest cottage” above the garage and overlooking a rear garden. Its rooms are made available to family and close friends visiting Atlanta, but also occasionally used by the owner and her husband as an informal (and convenient) retreat. In it are collected porcelain figures and china reminiscent of the ones pictured in the painting, but old photographs and documents relating to the Mrs. Smith’s family are also significant part of the furnishings; her grown children’s old toys have been made available for visiting grandchildren, and the bed in the cottage bedroom was the owners’ own from early in their marriage until the renovation. In short, the three rooms and the things in them were intended to be explicitly relationship-oriented with an emphasis on the historical flow of family identity, but also made to be currently and practically useful in the present lives of the resident, returning family members of several generations, and close friends. It is into this environment that the painting about a near-ritual of intimacy and privacy is itself integrated, placed in a nook in the large bathroom connected to the cottage bedroom in such a way that its reflection can be glimpsed in the wall-sized mirror even when only passing by the bathroom (*Figure 21 and Figure 22*). Again drawing on the idea that placing art in the working (and less publicly-honored) areas of the home often contributes to its inclusion into the flow of life rather than minimizing its importance, putting this painting in the master bath of the guest cottage should be read as a sign that Mrs.



Smith regards the 'private time' of her guests as worthy of being aestheticized. Conversely, it signals that the homemaker considers the qualities (both visual and interpersonal) of the painting appropriate to be reserved for those intimates invited to stay in her own private retreat.<sup>18</sup>

Considering the level of connection between the lives of artist and buyer described above, there is little doubt (or surprise) that the buyer is confident in her interpretation of what the painting is about, and of the appropriateness of using it as a signal of intimacy and friendship—*integration*—to those invited to use the cottage. Considering that small artworks, especially, are often used as a very medium of exchange of relationship and intimacy, it would also not be surprising if this painting had been created specifically for Mrs. Smith by Mrs. Brown and given as a gift—a clear sign of its *authenticity* as a domestic symbol. But as it happens, the Mrs. Smith did not receive it either by gift or purchase directly from the artist, but saw it on display at a venue favored by local women for exactly the kind of intimate relational moments evoked by the work: the Swan Coach House, a combination gift-shop, gallery and tea-shop (only offering lunch and afternoon tea), next door to the Atlanta Historical Society. The painting was offered for public sale as part of the Coach House's regular cycle of exhibitions of the art of local and Southern regional artists (particularly women). And though this buyer's association with the work was especially strong and

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<sup>18</sup> The privacy aspect of the placement is accentuated by the fact that there is another bathroom accessible to visitors from the kitchen and main living room of the cottage without having to enter or pass through the bedroom.

specific on account of her friendship with the artist, a similar reaction and interpretation could have been elicited from many of the women coming downstairs from having tea with a friend, who might well take a spin through the gallery before heading off to pick up her children's car pool.

Just as this buyer commented that she "could put [the painting] anywhere" on account of its size and appropriateness to any intimate space in her home, the ubiquity of the blue and white china pictured and its status (manifestly through *representations*) as a common marker of the intersection between aesthetics and the relational aspects of home making suggests that the work would easily be integrated into any of these other women's homes, as well. Indeed, this painting and the reactions it elicits are prototypical of the way paintings evoke and encode both space and relationship-through-objects in the domestic painting market; seeing the work in its multiple contexts suggests how *integration* evokes the concrete, private "wholeness" of domestic space understood through intuitive vision, but writ large onto semi-private social spaces and transactions. Integration is, after all, the key to understanding how this connection between artworks and people is the foundation for the coherent social space of the domestic painting market, upon which are built the concrete public arenas where the artworks are bought and sold. The connection between authenticity, vision, and the range of those other concrete arenas is the subject I take up next.

*Figures for Chapter V*

Figure 18



Claudia Hartley. Untitled, 1995. Acrylic on canvas. 20 x 24 in.

From a self-promotional postcard produced by Hartley herself, this painting features a white outdoor sofa that is a recurrent image in several of the artist's works, combining the inside and outside aspects of domesticity in Atlanta.

Figure 19



Christel Minotti. *Tuscan Landscape*, 2000. Acrylic on panel. 8 x 10 in.

Figure 20



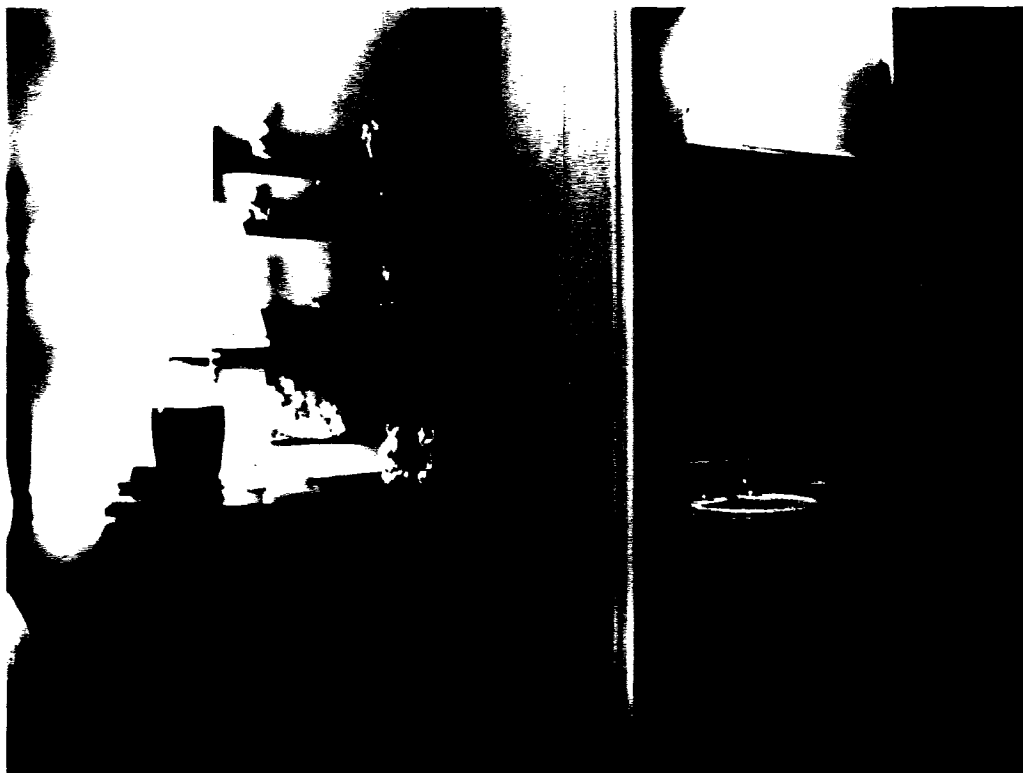
Katherine Brown. *Untitled*, 1993. Oil on canvas. 9 x 12 in.

Figure 21



The view of Katherine Brown's painting of teacups and nasturtiums as seen from bathroom counter emphasizes the decorative connection of artwork to space (the red, blue and green in the painting picked up in the shower curtain and the towels), but also the close and intimate nature of the space itself.

Figure 22



The painting can also be seen from the adjoining bedroom as reflected in the bathroom mirror (right side of photo). Meanwhile, the informal quality of floral subjects is picked up again in an unframed oil sketch (also by Brown) hung low over the chest of drawers in the bedroom.

## CHAPTER VI:

### The Look of Home, Part 1

Grace enters into domestic practice when the homemaker seeks to accentuate or, at least, retain the spectacular dimension of a space without destroying the equilibrium of labor and pleasure rooted in habit. In short, the homemaker seeks to inhabit a beautiful space without becoming a slave to it.

– Kevin Melchionne, “Living in Glass Houses,” p. 197.

Your husband called – He says to buy anything you want!

– Hand-painted sign in home accessories market

The women who perform the roles of artist and buyer in the domestic painting market are commonly acquainted with one another – and closer friendships are by no means rare – because they are integrated in a social milieu that is not limited to art-connected relationships. Because she had a longstanding friendship with its maker, the purchaser of the tea-cup painting discussed at the end of the last chapter, for instance, never needed to question that artwork’s authenticity as intuitively domestic. But in addition to (or in lieu of) such first-hand interpersonal knowledge, the places where domestic paintings are sold often stand as aesthetic character references in and of themselves; the “home-like” look and feel of many suggest that the works an art-



shopper will find there are, indeed, intended to be appreciated via the relational aesthetics and spatial practices native to the contemporary bourgeois interior. For one thing, the way shoppers and staff relate to each other as friendly peers rather than being explicitly subordinated to each other on account of either social standing or presumed expertise about art supports the implicit understanding that the cultivation of relationships is the purpose of art, the home, and even shopping itself. But the most readily apparent link between retail space and the symbolic values of the home is the way these commercial venues reflect the physical arrangements and patterns of movement of private houses: visitors are often guided in circuitous paths while being provided restricted views; artworks are displayed for close but informal inspection, often in proximity to other objects of the home and sometimes linked to them visually. In short, with varying degrees of emphasis on the physical or relational aspects of domesticity, even the retail spaces of the Atlanta market are designed to allude to if not actually conjure intuitive vision; thus, they can be defined (and the continuity of the aesthetic judged) by their distance/difference from the private home as normative space of the market, in terms of physical attributes, social practices and – particularly – visual habits.

Selling works in spaces that re-create the home can bolster a buyer's confidence in the authenticity of the specific works within, but the practice also validates this essentially *private* way of experiencing artworks by displaying and

affirming it in the *public* sphere, thus opening up a discursive space in which to make more essential claims for the importance of the relational aesthetic itself, and of the connection between home and art. It is in this respect that the retail arena of the domestic painting market plays a greater role than as the location of commodity exchange, alone: it is the site of communication among artists, buyers and their intermediaries *within* the market, but also collectively *by* the market. Other non-art social contexts like church or school notwithstanding, this is where the flow of information between producers and consumers is achieved, not just through the impersonal dynamics of supply and demand, but through active expression of desires and preferences in spaces that are frequented by painters and non-painters alike, and where staff are attuned to listening to customers' opinions about art, gifts, homes, and friendships. These spaces are where the women who make up the market see the public face of their own collective effort, the cooperatively defined ideology of art and home that is filtered through gender and class. By elaborating the system and inscribing it onto commercial space, these women have gone beyond the creation of a regionally-specific way of linking aesthetics and domesticity in the privacy of their own homes: the rooms are also instructional and prescriptive ones in which the "proper" relationship between art and the home may be modeled for and perpetuated in the local public cultural arena.

But as sites of intersection between this market (and its aesthetics) and the wider local and national discourse of art and design, these spaces are also where pressures of modification, dilution, and subversion of local values are first felt. Indeed, how intuitive sight is translated into the public spaces of retail consumption demonstrates the tension inherent in the cultural situation of domestic painting within the field of visual culture. The differences in the market spaces and display strategies suggest a dialectic of vision between two modes of representing space: one – using visual objects as phenomenological pivots – is a representation of bodily space and practice more than of visual trajectories, while the other partakes of the dominant logic of the eye. Women in the market spend much of their time in a constant back and forth between the two modes of seeing and moving – around and within intimate space, over and through commercialized, rationalized, abstract space.<sup>1</sup> Examining the continuum of selling venues in the domestic painting market also highlights the tension between the core local function of artwork as interpersonal currency and its role as (just another) aesthetic commodity in a culture of visual consumption, where

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<sup>1</sup>Lefebvre's statement that modern towns, suburbs, and buildings are marked by homogenization and exchangeability, in which "repetition has everywhere defeated uniqueness . . . and products have vanquished works," (Lefebvre, p. 75.) has been increasingly applicable to the Atlanta market even during the period of my study, and touches precisely on the aspects of contemporary American culture that are both the impetus for an "alternative" market for visual works and what most threaten its persistence and integrity. In the quasi-public residential areas of Atlanta (including newly built cul-de-sac "neighborhoods" that provide—or enforce—a sterile privacy behind guarded gates) there is an ever-more-insistent encroachment of "possessive visualization," and superficial values are evermore being used for the exploitation of new (or reclaimed) intra-urban and suburban spaces, producing false visual difference that masks the homology and interchangeability of these "homes" treated as consumer goods.

image seems to supercede practice. Indeed, moving from the market's home-studios through shops and galleries that nevertheless evoke integrated domesticity, and finally to the quasi-real space of "designer's show homes" and magazine articles is a journey from the phenomenological way of experiencing domestic space and its aesthetic objects to a dominantly optical one. Finally, then, such a survey demonstrates the instability and fragility of using "the look of home" as an indicator of authentic domesticity in a culture in which the power of images is inextricably entwined with the flow of capital and the abstraction of the material environment.

### *Neighborly Arts*

Before turning to the places where paintings are sold, I will begin with the commercial spaces that most successfully and authentically integrate the look and feel of home with the economic process of bringing artworks to market: the at-home studios in which the majority of the objects are produced. Better than three-quarters of the artists I interviewed had their studios in a room of their own domestic spaces, though there was considerable variation in the degree to which these rooms were (or were able to be) set aside exclusively for art-related activities. The ability of artists who work at home to make several new pieces while storing multiple finished works (usually leaned against a wall) with relative ease—even in converted bedrooms or sun-porches doing double duty as

family and business spaces – is another practical advantage of the small scale of paintings in this market, making the choice to work from home more feasible. Similarly, the popular choice of watercolors and acrylics as media in which to work offers the advantages of being solvent-fume free compared to oil paints, whatever the other aesthetic qualities that recommended them to the artists. This is more of an issue in the small spaces that are typical of home studios (which rarely have arrangements for separate ventilation) than for artists working in commercial studio buildings, especially since there are often children in the house, as well. As has long been the case for women in all sorts of home production, the presence of children in the work space presents certain problems (not the least of which is distraction of the artist when she is trying to work), but it is the reality that women often must play the roles of mother and worker sequentially, alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, and the home studio is a reasonable response to this situation. I must also reiterate that “response” is not *necessarily* the same as “concession”; while many of the artists to whom I spoke expressed the desire to have a more spacious or better-arranged studio, most also mentioned that their work as artists in general and having their studios at home in particular allowed them to move easily between the activities associated with the roles of artist and mother that they saw as rightly contiguous. Thus the dreamt-of studio was, for most, not a place away from the home, but an

expanded or reconfigured version of their home,<sup>2</sup> another example of how the ideology of this market does not build a wall (literal or figurative) between domesticity and the practice of making art, or between the artist and the homemaker.

Indeed, the routines and responsibilities of parenting that often bracket the artist's working hours between driving morning and afternoon carpools or being available when their children are dropped off by the school bus or by other parents (also usually mothers) provide opportunities for the kind of producer-consumer integration I spoke of above; the informal interactions that happen while leaning into the window of another parent's car or talking to others at the bus-stop can easily lead to a discussion of "What are you working on today?" and an invitation to come see. Home studios mean that a visit to the artist is not an out of the way trip to the "arts district," but just a detour along the neighborhood paths already known and well-traveled. This is not to say that all or even most artists who work at home welcome people dropping by during the

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<sup>2</sup>This is not to say that these women do not make practical concessions on account of family obligations. While some artists looked forward to a time in the future when their economic situation might enable them to build an additional, dedicated space on to their current homes or more completely convert a present space, many also acknowledged that such a project was not likely in the near future because the income generated from their art was not "extra," but an important part of the family's total financial resources. This was most acute for women whose children were past elementary school age, for whom the costs of a college education were already visible on the economic horizon. Others pegged the quality of their workspace to the growth of their children in a different way, considering the possibilities of moving a young child into a bedroom shared with an older sibling, for instance, or looking forward to re-claiming a college-age child's room as a studio once he had gone off to school. In most cases, then, the cost savings of a home studio over a rented space were one of the considerations in the decision to stay home.

already limited time they have for work; for most painters, an additional benefit of the home studio is the expectation of privacy it affords.<sup>3</sup> But on the other hand, friends invited over to lunch during the work day were being invited to the studio, too, while those called to come by and look at or give opinions about current works-in-progress would likely be offered at least a cup of coffee or tea – their visit would be governed by the rules of the home more than by those of the workplace. With a home studio, there is a fairly seamless connection between personal and professional hospitality, just as there is a fairly seamless connection between the physical space of the studio and that of the kitchen or living room. And more importantly, there is often a fairly seamless connection between the sensitivities – aesthetic and relational – with which the artist regards her home and its objects and those that she uses to understand and create her artworks; artworks arising out of the context of domesticity naturally tend to be informed by and express that very domesticity.

It is another small step from producing artwork in the home to selling it from the home. Really, piece by piece selling from the artist's own home is just a variant of the "studio sales" that were the standard until the Nineteenth-Century advent of the dealer-critic/commercial gallery system, despite the low regard in

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<sup>3</sup> This is a fact recognized on both sides of the producer/consumer distinction: one buyer, an interior designer taking a semi-enforced hiatus from her own career on account of her own two small children at home, commented specifically that a nice aspect of dealing with artists' agents was that the buyer was freed from the worry that she might "bother" the painter at work at home by going by to visit, even when the purpose of the visit was to look at and buy paintings.

which such sales are currently held by gallery owners and agents who represent the artists making them.<sup>4</sup> But in the domestic painting market, sales of art from the home are also part of the complex way that women's relationships with each other include mutual economic support, rather than just emotional support.

Painters are not the only middle and upper-middle class women who run businesses (some of them part-time) from home, varying their commitment of time and energy depending on the demands placed upon them by family and other social responsibilities; textile work and other creative activities often dismissed as "crafts" on account of their association with women have long been produced in the home, and contemporary versions of home production are still a part of the domestic economy. But the idea of the Tupperware Party (if seldom the actual event) and similar distribution schemes blending interpersonal relationships and social occasions with mutual economic support among women are also a part of the cultural landscape of bourgeois domesticity.

Since at least the early-1980s, in Atlanta and elsewhere across the South, some women have gained local reputations among their peers not for their skills at producing clothing or decorative items for the home, and not even for representing lines of useful products themselves, but for bringing together their

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<sup>4</sup> Paraphrasing Plattner's lengthy discussion of this rather contentious aspect of the division of economic responsibilities between producers and distributors, expert intermediaries are paid "gatekeepers" and commercial go-betweens, especially necessary in markets where producers and consumers have been systematically insulated from one another via and on account of the mystifying ideology of avant-garde aesthetic. Studio sales deny them their share in the transaction and tend to make them very upset.



friends who do at clothing “trunk shows” and combined gift and accessory “festivals” in their homes. Often scheduled in the Fall to coincide with the prime gift-giving season of the year, these events are convenient—literally *convening* many independent producers at one place and time—and explicitly interpersonal; they are an opportunity to stock up on the interpersonal currency of gifts (often things “for the home”) while supporting their producer friends, who benefit from the increased and concentrated exposure of their work to new customers as well as established ones, since invitees are encouraged to “bring a friend,” and often do. The result is a palpable expression of the relational aesthetic, since talking to friends is an equal draw with looking at the objects displayed, those having provided the opportunity to “catch up” in the first place. At such home shows, most horizontal surfaces of the hostess’ house are crowded with the sellers’ wares and extra tables are usually set up (complete with attractive tablecloths) to make more room for display, though less for movement. The result is in an amplification of the way aesthetic objects are layered in the space of the bourgeois home, and of the home’s constrained views and circular paths. Small paintings are a much-desired part of the domestic-relational aesthetic mix at these shows, and several of the painters I interviewed started attracting local followings on account of this kind of exposure.

This kind of sales venue suggests one way paintings are integrated into (and literally seen as part of) the world of “things for the home” and highlights

the importance of peer-relationships between producers and non-producers, since the producers at these events are also consumers of other women's work. Another type of home show affords many of the same opportunities for social integration while more explicitly confirming the privileged position of artworks within domestic aesthetics. Not nearly as common as the multi-vendor gift-oriented shows but not rare, either, shows put on in their own homes by an artist's friends or relatives who are already well-established in the community are a very effective way of introducing the artist to a network of other women. In these cases, the home-owner's artworks are taken down in one or a few rooms of her house and replaced with works by the artist. An "open house" coffee or lunch may be held for a day or over a weekend for guests to view the paintings and talk to the artist. As I mentioned in the last chapter, this sort of show put on by the buyer of the teacup painting helped establish that artist and her work locally, and friendship with the same artist prompted Mrs. Irwin to stage a second home-show herself, thus launching her own career as well.

While this open-house setting resembles a contemporary avant-garde art gallery opening in some respects (including the fact that many of the attendees spend as much time chatting with the other visitors to the show as they do looking at the paintings), the setting is strikingly different in that there remains seating and other furniture in the rooms – only the owner's own paintings are removed, not all the furnishings. This means that many of the specifically

domestic patterns of movement native to the space also remain intact, framing the visitors' experience of the art in a specific recognizable domesticity, and even the intuitive way of looking. In fact, for the residents and friends familiar enough with the house to feel "at home" in it, themselves, the contrast between its old furniture with new art can key a heightened awareness of both, and of the already-relational space itself. This is a far cry from the role of the commercial gallery's stereotypically featureless white walls, which is to form a "neutral" background for the art. But more important from the standpoint of presenting the artworks to a new, private "public," the quasi-personal space of a home thus transformed by paintings suggests to the visiting viewers that the works could easily have a similar transformative effect in their own homes. The message communicated is that this art *belongs* in the – or my, or your – home, and seeing paintings through doorways, over tables and past chairs (perhaps especially when occupied) makes it easy to imagine them as part of one's own domestic setting, and even how the experience of that setting would be enriched by the inclusion of artwork in it.

While the hostess of such a private show might receive a small painting by the artist as a token of her thanks, and she who organizes a multi-vendor show typically receives "freebies" from her exhibitors, neither of these events is intended primarily to generate income for the hostess. But elsewhere, the look and feel of these settings have been recreated for explicitly (though not

*exclusively*) commercial purposes. When staging her annual “salon shows” of the artists she represented, Anne Irwin drew upon both these paradigms, leaning more towards the gift show than the private exhibition in the look of the event. As I described the scene at the beginning of Chapter 5, the many paintings displayed at the show (especially the small ones) were placed on and leaned against furniture rather than hanging only on the walls of Mrs. Irwin’s house, visually stressing the plentitude of choice available to the visitor rather than explicitly demonstrating the way new artworks can reinvigorate the experience of the lived room (*Figure 23* and *Figure 24*). Thus it is right to say that intuitive vision was only suggested by the scene at the home show rather than epitomized by it, partially because the authentic practice of intuitive vision is necessarily compromised by the commercial nature of the gathering, though considerably less so in that temporarily-refitted but still-working home than in more conventional retail environments. On the other hand, the arrangement of Mrs. Irwin’s show made movement of the visitor’s body through the rooms essential, and produced a visual experience that was a far cry from the long, unobstructed viewpoints typically privileged in high-art settings.

The invitation to view paintings in Mrs. Irwin’s house asserted the connection between art and real homes even though the arrangement of the works inside stressed the social aspects of shopping as much as it emphasized the domestic aesthetic, *per se*. But that second aspect of seeing art in the richness

of a home setting was not truly absent from Mrs. Irwin's shows, either, but was only deferred for the sake of more specificity to the actual residences of her guests: a key service Mrs. Irwin offered was delivering paintings to a potential buyer so that she could take several days to judge for herself how the works might transform her own space and her own use of it. Indeed, since in the first years of her business as an artist's agent the one show each Spring was the only opportunity for potential customers to see artworks en masse, many of her sales were to women who called her to describe a need (or space in the house) and to ask Mrs. Irwin to bring to their homes a few pieces that were likely to work. Critical components of this consultant service were Mrs. Irwin's own taste and vision, which she shared with the client both at the time of delivery and afterwards, lending advice about the placement of these works and offering suggestions of others that might be more suitable. In this way, Mrs. Irwin's professional practice stressed the private, even intimate aspects of aesthetic decisions for one's living space — of how to find one's personal "look of home" — while also providing the kind of friendly, advice- and opinion-filled social environment her friends and peers expect to find when shopping for gifts, or "just looking" as an interpersonal activity in and of itself. And whether displayed in Mrs. Irwin's own rooms or carried to the home of a customer, artworks presented in such a combination of social and physical contexts were marked as clearly and authentically *domestic paintings*.

### *Buckhead*

When Anne Irwin first began representing local artists at the tail end of the art boom of the 1980s, art agents and consultants were becoming common as brokers between the presumably opposed worlds of professionalized (if not fully avant-garde) art and corporate America, both as adjuncts to commercial designers who outfitted office buildings and as experts hired to assist in the creation of corporate art collections. But Mrs. Irwin was doing something new in terms of her specific focus on sales for the home, and the different dynamic (i.e., sympathy) assumed to exist between the two groups she served, artists and buyers.<sup>5</sup> Though neither her artists nor her buyers considered art and commerce nor art and domesticity to be antithetical pairs, intentionally and publicly connecting all three was still a novel venture, undertaken by only a few women in the contemporary market. While Mrs. Irwin's home show adopted some of the ways that gift and accessory festivals and private exhibitions brought retail aspects of selling artwork into the home environment, another woman who understood the market's possibilities acknowledged the connection between paintings and the fully-realized domestic aesthetic by bringing the look of home into the explicitly retail environment of her permanent storefront.

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<sup>5</sup> This focus did not arrive by way of a calculated decision to address the home market instead of a commercial one, but came naturally from her own feelings about art "completing" homes, the style of the artists she first represented, and from her social connections with other peers, especially friends who were interior designers.

Erika Reade, Ltd. opened in a strip shopping center in northwest Atlanta at about the same time Mrs. Irwin began representing artists, and the owner stressed that her early "shoe-string budget" prevented her from transforming the open box interior typical of such developments to achieve the unified look she might attempt were she starting out now.<sup>6</sup> What she did achieve even then, however, was a complex version (or vision) of a socialized domestic space, in which the shelves and furniture (armoires, chests of drawers, and long "French country" tables Reade imported, rather than ordinary commercial fixtures) were not only surfaces to display merchandise, but also to partition the space along the scale of small rooms, alluding to if not fully re-creating the patterns of movement and sight common to the bourgeois home. To this day, shopping in the store entails moving through a series of small arrangements of domestic items, grouped experientially as much as categorically: while there are clusters of picture frames or candles, it is just as easy to find linen napkins alongside place-settings of silver or an interesting tea service. Both because of the small size of the merchandise and its arrangement, quickly moving through the space does not enable the shopper to "take it all in." Instead, leisurely looking is rewarded, as is stopping to ask directions and advice from the sales staff (a central point to which I'll return shortly).<sup>7</sup> But equally important for the spatial sense created in

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<sup>6</sup> Interview 10 (1995).

<sup>7</sup> Local women's definition of "shopping" as a leisure pursuit and social practice in and of itself (and as distinct from running errands or buying necessities) would include the aspect of

the store and most importantly for this discussion, Reade has always placed artworks for sale in and around these interior “rooms” as well as on the outside, perimeter walls. As she said, the artworks gave the space a “finished look” and more home-like feel.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while I have been stressing that the relationship of paintings to other home furnishings in the domestic environment is critical to understanding how those works become fully “art,” conversely, Reade’s assertion that the paintings in her shop are necessary to establish the feel of the place as authentically domestic suggests that art is recognized as being necessary for residential space to become fully “home,” as well.

Erika Reade, Ltd. has a fairly devoted following among the women I interviewed and enjoys a reputation for “authenticity” that was singular in the market. This customer loyalty seems to have as much to do with the interpersonal space of the store as it does with its physical space, for the two are as mutually reinforcing in public spaces like the shop as they are in private ones or in hybrid spaces like Mrs. Irwin’s home during her annual exhibitions. In fact, the two women’s retail practices are linked in this way: Mrs. Irwin’s purpose in showing paintings at home was not to replicate how the art for sale would “really look” in her customer’s homes so much as signify by the look that the

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discovery that slow movement through such small spaces entails, though this would likely have been the case with their nineteenth-century forbears, as well.

<sup>8</sup> Interview 10 (1995). Not coincidentally, the combination of artworks and (other) gift-wares reminds the socially-integrated visitor of the scene at one of the exclusive multi-vendor home shows, where the idea that artworks are a necessary part of a complete offering of relational trade-goods is also clearly in view.



paintings arose out of a familiar social domesticity; but the look had to be backed by her own interpersonal commitment to make sure the paintings she sold really would work in the buyers' homes. Likewise, the domestic look of Reade's shop is principally a marker for its more meaningful relational feel, guaranteed by a sales staff committed to knowing the aesthetics of their clientele (many of them individually) as well as they knew their merchandise – artworks, but also tea towels, baby-spoons, and photo frames. A collateral result of the art-inclusive look of the store is that the idiosyncratic arrangement of the goods nearly necessitates a shopper's engaging with the staff to find what she's looking for if she is looking for something specific, and if she has not already turned to them for advice about what to look for in the first place.

As the advice and encouragement from the staff is one of the things that sets this retail space apart and gives authenticity to its domestically inspired integration of artworks and "accessories," I should point out how the kind of expertise offered about domestic paintings differs from that offered by the sales staff of galleries devoted to other genres of art. In other markets, part of the job of such intermediaries as artist's agents and gallery personnel is to lend confidence to the potential art-buyer that the work in question really is art and thus worth the price being asked for it. And like their parallels in strictly art-oriented venues, the saleswomen in the domestic painting market implicitly link the authenticity (and therefore the worth) of paintings to the identity and

character of the artists who produced them. But again, the principal value of artworks in the domestic painting market is neither art-historical (“painting for history”) nor as capital investment, so the matter of artists’ “credentials” in this context is understood differently (and in some ways as less critical) than it is elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Here, such credentials have little to do with the relationship of the artist to her peers among other artists and much to do with her sympathy with the lives of her local peers regardless of their connection to or involvement in the arts. The assumption of social parity between artists and buyers is echoed in an assumption of parity between buyers and sales staff, as well, which in turn makes the staff’s claims about the character of the artist relevant and ultimately trustworthy. The workers at Erika Reade, Ltd., especially, are trusted to be knowledgeable about paintings and to understand the desires and interpersonal needs of the customers because they share them themselves.

Indeed, shoppers often treat the staff as friends (and sometimes they literally are), believed to be able to help with making selections in part because they are also thought (at least in the case of the primary owner/buyer) to have already pre-selected the items in the store for their appropriateness to the purpose of concretizing personal identities by embodying relationships.<sup>10</sup> More

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<sup>9</sup> Again, the relatively affordable prices of these artworks (generally from \$250-\$2000 for an oil painting from 9” x 12” up to 18” x 24”) lessen a potential buyer’s anxiety over whether the premium they are paying for “original art” is fair.

<sup>10</sup> A surprising number of the women I interviewed claimed to have had either a friend or a relative who worked for Erika Reade at sometime since she opened her store—all the more

generally, then, the appropriate expertise in this art-world is not about the identity of the work's creator but knowledge and understanding of how paintings are used in the overlapping contexts of interpersonal relationship and the home. Because this expertise is a kind of "common sense" rather than technically-specialized and esoteric knowledge, non-employee friends and relatives (who are almost as likely as the staff to know the artist personally) may perform the "expert" role as well as (and often along side) workers in the establishments in which paintings are sold, bringing with them familiarity with the specific home environment where the painting is intended to be placed, or with the personality of the woman to whom it will be given. This is not to say that the opinions of women in those venues are not sought or are valued less, but that together with that of the shopper herself, their expertise is expected to be as much about the appropriateness of certain gifts for certain social occasions or kinds of people as it is about the relative (concrete) aesthetic merits of a particular painting, or about the specific temperament and character of the artist who painted it.

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surprising considering the very low employee turnover rate claimed by Reade. Several of her staff had been there since she opened, and several more at least seven years, so it is not unlikely that regular customers would come to regard the long-time saleswomen as friends. But Reade also employs seasonally during the Christmas season and on a part-time basis at other times of the year, drawing from a pool of women of her own class (from young mothers to retirement-aged women) who are presumably able to offer the kind of assistance expected of the shop, rather than simply running the cash registers.

Still, an artist's identity as "one of our own" does matter to both shoppers and to Reade, herself, as indicated by the way her business practices and the social aspects of the domestic painting market intersect in her personal relationships with many of the artists whose work is shown in the store. In the first years of Reade's store she dealt directly with all the artists whose work she sold, helping several become established in the marketplace and even assuming a mentor's role with some, encouraging them and helping with the business aspects of their work as artists. Playing the dealer-critic role to the extent it seemed appropriate, Reade even held an annual fall show of the artists' work (complete with an evening reception focusing exclusively on art with the other items covered) in addition to selling the paintings in the context of her other merchandise. But though she was clearly in a position to help the painters by showing and selling their work, there was, as usual, thought to be an element of reciprocity in the relationship, since some were friends who helped get the word out about the store when it opened and were customers, too. Eventually, though, another regular customer (Irwin) told her that she had begun representing artists (including one already shown in the store) and offered to provide a rotating selection of work for the shop. Though this arrangement freed Reade from the additional administrative duties involved in getting works directly from artists (for which she was gladly willing to forgo a percentage of the sales), she says she was motivated at least as much by her desire to "do well

for" the artists by entrusting them to Mrs. Irwin, who would make it her business to personally nurture them as well as advance their careers and reputations.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that a commitment to the interpersonal side of the business kept either Ms. Reade or Mrs. Irwin from being always conscious and protective of their places in a competitive marketplace, for each had plans for nurturing the success of their respective enterprises that did not always easily mesh with the others'. For Mrs. Irwin, handling the art shown in Reade's shop gave her access to another highly-accessible display space that offered an emphasis on the art's domestic character complementing that of her own home show;<sup>12</sup> she also gained access to a steady stream of customers predisposed to make purchases for their homes and encouraged to do so by the staff. On the other hand, Reade still took her share of the sales, and paintings were sometimes moved or re-arranged by Reade or her staff to suit the needs of the store and its other merchandise, which did not always agree with Mrs. Irwin's ideas on how the paintings should be placed to be seen (sometimes literally) in their best light.

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<sup>11</sup> Reade had taken a 30% share of the sales of artwork in her store, and made a point of the fact that the standard cut for commercial galleries was 50%. After Irwin took over handling the art, the artists' share remained 70%, with Reade taking 20% to Irwin's 10%. Despite the gallery-like "opening," she stressed that she was *not* a gallery, nor like one in that she makes no claims on the artist for studio sales or on Irwin for works hung in the store but sold after having been rotated out, but only asks her cut for works sold directly out of the store. Interview 10 (1995).

<sup>12</sup> Several years into her business, Irwin had started displaying her available paintings on a wall in the Interiors Market—a warehouse converted into a collective decorative furnishings showroom. While it gave her a permanent place to show paintings that was ostensibly connected to the furnishing of homes, the location of her wall was hardly favorable for either customer traffic or viewing, and the general environment of the building lacked the authenticity of Reade's store. The Interiors Market and another similar space are discussed more, below.

Mrs. Irwin was, therefore, always looking for additional places to show the work of her artists to advantage, and when Boxwood's Gardens and Gifts – another store just a half-mile down the road from Erika Reade, Ltd. – had approached Mrs. Irwin about providing art for them, as well, it seemed like another opportunity to capitalize on an established clientele and regular traffic. To Reade, however, such an arrangement constituted an unacceptable dilution of what made her own store special and “unique.” She understood Mrs. Irwin's desire for “more wall space” and control, was happy to have Mrs. Irwin show the work under her own banner, and was even willing to end their arrangement if it was best for Irwin, but she was unwilling to have the work of artists shown in her shop available through a direct competitor.<sup>13</sup>

Though Reade's was among the earliest (if not the first) retail store in northwest Atlanta to intentionally integrate artworks into a retail space in order to more closely reflect the domestic aesthetic and therefore offer a “complete” gift and home accessories service to her customers, other stores in the area followed suit by also structuring their retail space to partially represent the material environment of the home, often with more immediately visible success than Reade. As boundaries in the patchwork of in-town neighborhoods and commercial zones of northwest Atlanta have shifted, once-residential blocks

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<sup>13</sup> Interview 18 (1995).

have been converted to shops and offices, sometimes redeveloped with new buildings, but just as often via the conversion of small houses into stores.

As one might imagine, such buildings are ready made for stores devoted to providing shoppers with accessories for their homes.

Boxwood's, for instance, occupies a connected pair of houses it once leased from the Plantation Shop, another home furnishings and gift store with an emphasis on traditionally styled antiques and china, catering principally to women a generation older than Reade's late-thirties. As the owners of Boxwood's expanded from their original business of garden design services and began to sell garden and garden-room furniture and accessories, they needed to expand from just an office and yard space of the houses to more interior rooms, and eventually assumed the Plantation Shop's buildings, many of its suppliers and sources, and its base of customers expecting to find things for their entire home, rather than just their sunrooms. Like the many other stores operating from converted houses and their pre-existing division into small rooms, Boxwood's was a step ahead in trying to project a "home-like" atmosphere to its shoppers. Seeking Mrs. Irwin's art placement services was meant to add both the relational and visual content of artwork to the total domestic aesthetic.

The needs of Boxwood's and similar stores both nearby and throughout in-town Atlanta created additional opportunities for the social and economic integration of local painters with their non-artist peers. Indeed, when Mrs. Irwin

decided to continue her business relationship with Reade rather than provide Boxwood's with art, Jones-Fowler Fine Art (a pair of sisters-in-law who had also begun showing and representing local artists friends from their homes) stepped in to take the job, solidifying and expanding the domestic painting market by bringing to it another constellation of relationships with a slightly different geographical center.<sup>14</sup> As with the case of Mrs. Irwin and Reade, the artists and shop-owners enjoyed the mutual benefit of bringing their similar but not identical set of customers together in the service of fostering the suggestion of beautiful and relationally-saturated homes. Yet despite appearances, the relationships between the shop and the painters shown there – leaving aside the local customers – seemed to be more of convenience than genuine sympathy, and there was little evidence of the kind of relational synergy that so benefited Reade's store or Mrs. Irwin's practice. For all the economic benefits to all parties brought by the expansion of domestic painting as a market and the conscious adoption of its way of presenting art in the represented context of the house rather than in actual homes, it was also a move towards a visualized ideal of domesticity that could itself be commodified and reproduced, even without the social aspects from which it arose and which it encouraged. In other words, as

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<sup>14</sup> While most of Irwin's artists and buyers lived and worked in the residential sections of the city's northwest quadrant (known as Buckhead), Judy Jones and Marge Fowler had their base slightly north in the suburbs just outside the Perimeter, Atlanta's beltway interstate. There was still some overlap between the two groups as many of the buyers were familiar with both sets of artists and each other, and at least one of Irwin's artists had works sold at a Jones-Fowler home show before she committed to work with Irwin.



consciously adopting the “look of home” came to be seen as advantageous for attracting customers, its elements were both simplified and accentuated to be more efficiently used as marketing tools, resulting in commercial spaces that paid homage to domesticity but lacked its characteristically integrated senses of movement and sight, as well as its dependence on specific personal identities connected to a local community.<sup>15</sup>

The expression of the domestic aesthetic into commercial space – meant to signal authenticity – simultaneously opened the door to the visual strategies already dominant in consumer and high-art culture, including even the dissociation of artworks from their concrete places in homes, but beginning with the reassertion of the disembodied “roving eye” of the shopper and the display of goods to accommodate it. As I said above, converted small houses would seem to be ideal spaces in which to replicate the scale and patterns of movement of the home, and therefore, in which to display goods appropriate for the ultimately relational role played by the furnishings in a house. The common practice of creating physically and emotionally layered arrangements of pictures, dishes, figurines and other small accessories on dressers and side tables logically

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<sup>15</sup> While some of the other shops had the kind of personal identification with the owner that marked Erika Reade, Ltd., Boxwood’s, for instance, was a partnership of several diverse owners with different levels of connection to Buckhead’s culture of bourgeois domesticity. This is not to say that there was an “insider’s only” atmosphere in the least, for recall one of the principal artists associated with Irwin began her local career with a home show given for her to introduce her to her new “neighbors.” On the other hand, one buyer and part-time designer stated, “I live in a five-mile radius,” as did her peers, suggesting the importance of assimilating into the local community to establish not just friendships, but also reciprocal professional relationships to meet social and material needs. Interview 15 (1995).

sets a pattern for similarly-styled displays of goods in the stores, even with the recognition that a commercial space necessarily offer a wider assortment and greater number of objects together than one would likely find in a real home. But as translated in many retail shops, these vignettes are often replaced with such a superabundance of products that it is difficult to make sense of what one is seeing (*Figure 25*). This is precisely where the reflexivity aspect of intuitive vision is put to work in the service of commerce: as paintings often offer a visual key and literal focus to a grouping in the home by repeating and connecting formal elements of the other objects, here the two small paintings on the rear wall reflect the profusion of faux fruit variously clustered about before them, only distinguished from the mass, really, by the rectilinear qualities of their frames. Indeed, *Figure 26* shows a third painting sitting on the table in front of the window at center right, nearly obscured by a tiered basket and a pedestal bowl that contains plastic versions of the peach it pictures. With so insistent a “theme” to the room, the subtlety of reflexivity would be wasted, were it actually called up in the first place. But the relationship between artworks and the objects in this room is not really an example of reflexivity, at all. Going beyond “matching,” even, here the painting becomes an illustrative product label, meant to be seen from across the room and to identify the contents of the confusion of colors and forms between it and the viewer.

Another significant difference between the way the retail space in this converted house is arranged and the way the rooms of a lived-in home are experienced is that the density of objects in the room actually prevents a visitor from easily moving into it or towards the paintings without repositioning or clambering over the other merchandise. As with (indeed partially dependent on) the quasi-reflexivity described above, such presentations conjure a doppelganger of the movement-and-pause patterns of domestic practice. Shoppers are encouraged to move through the space along a path established by the line of doorways between the rooms (*Figure 27*), but the complexity of the scene a shopper meets at each turn denies her ability to quickly parse it as an elaborated, suggestive, but still coherent space, which was possible with the vignettes I discussed in previous chapters because of their wealth of personal associations. Here, “reading the label” requires a full stop, and only within a limited set of viewing positions. From these, the room is seen as a whole, as an “arrangement” in its own right, a diorama of domestic consumption.

In this way, the dominance of the visual encompasses the space *between* the paintings and viewer, establishing perspective as the fixed view of someone outside, gazing in and past.<sup>16</sup> And when the shopper has taken in the scene in

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<sup>16</sup> This not a space to be entered into or lived, but one to be looked at, much in the way rooms in houses maintained as historical museums are cordoned off from the line of tourists that are shepherded through them by costumed interpreters. Here, the “look but don’t touch” is a temporary admonition, and the local “guides” are more than willing to help shoppers take home a souvenir of their excursion, perhaps an entire ensemble. Ironically, the discrete rooms make the

one room, looking precedes actually walking through the next door to the next arrangement, and so on. Not every space in the shop has to be encountered in its entirety this way, for two of the interior rooms have only one door and must be entered in order for their contents (just as densely packed, but lacking artworks) to be fully seen. But in these cases, shoppers were just as likely to stick their heads in and decide it was not worth the effort as they were to commit to deciphering from within. It is telling, then, that one of the few places where a smaller group of things for sale seems to yield its meaning to a casual glance rather than command attention occurs in the glassed breezeway that connects Boxwoods' two buildings—a passage too narrow to allow stepping back and that gives way visually to the informal rear garden rather than another architectural space (*Figure 28*). Though the colors are expressly coordinated and the coastal landscape painting and other items are linked by a common theme—association with an aestheticized “outdoors,” perhaps chosen because of the garden they face—the expectation of movement *through* the scene rather than just past it seems to have been built in, as well.

This momentary address to the body in motion as well as to the shopper's eye gives a clue that Boxwood's strategy of displaying art with home accessories has roots in domesticity's way of seeing, even if it currently shows little evidence

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shop's staff less accessible to shoppers for either advice or directions, unless she comes directly to the sales counter at one end of the store.

of being cultivated to enhance that physical, relational aesthetic.<sup>17</sup> But while it seems in sharp contrast to the intensely practical connection between the body and domestic space seen in the artist's home studio, the steps between them are incremental ones. At each stage, the increasing distance between the space reworked into a venue for showing art and the space where subjectivity and quotidianity rule results in an increasing distance (and alienation) between the presumed viewer and the things set out for her consideration, including paintings. Arrangement, viewed from afar, is made to stand in for personal meaning. But on the other hand, while the thematic arrangement of artworks and dozens of ceramic fruits at Boxwood's, say, implies a fairly shallow organizational principle, its very shallowness – its lack of a more forcefully expressed visual rationale – has the benefit of allowing the distance between viewer and object, display and lived-space, to be closed by the fairly easy appropriation of the painting or other object by the viewer and its removal to her own domestic space. If so inclined, a shopper could grab a painting practically without violating the scene as a whole. In the marketplaces of domestic painting to which I turn in the next chapter, however, visual regimes not only divide art from the viewer, but even picture domestic space itself as a remote and ultimately intangible world.

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<sup>17</sup> Not that the makers of this visualized regime lack a sense of humor about their work: the outdoorsy feel is suggested by the landscape, picnic basket and pastel-hued tiki-torches, but also by the set of glass insect pins cleverly displayed as if crawling on a window-screen.

*Figures for Chapter VI.*

Figure 23



Arrangement of artworks in the family room during Anne Irwin's home show, April 1995.

Figure 24



Arrangement of artworks in the dining room during Anne Irwin's home show, April 1995.

Figure 25



Display of fruit-themed decorative items (including paintings) at Boxwood's Gardens and Gifts. July 2002



Figure 26



Wider view of fruit-themed decorative items at Boxwood's Gardens and Gifts.  
July 2002.

Figure 27



View of the restricted line of sight and movement in Boxwood's Gardens and Gifts, July 2002.

Figure 28



Display of products in the breezeway of Boxwood's, July 2002. Here the scene is not overwhelming, but can be parsed in passing as a shopper moves from one building to the other through the narrow connecting passage.

## CHAPTER VII: The Look of Home, Part 2

A further important aspect of spaces of this kind is their increasingly pronounced visual character. They are made with the visible in mind: the visibility of people and things, of spaces and whatever is contained by them. The predominance of visualization (more important than 'spectacularization', which is in any case subsumed by it) serves to conceal repetitiveness. People *look*, take sight, take seeing, for life itself. We build on the basis of papers and plans. We buy on the basis of images.

– Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 76.

The integration of art into the whole practice of bourgeois domesticity is what marks domestic painting, and those retail spaces that evoke hospitality but also the habits of seeing and movement native to the private home are most likely to vouch for the authenticity of the works displayed within. But the translation of such an aesthetic into the marketplace is a complicated process, necessitating compromises between its phenomenological and relational aspects, and tending to include "foreign" expressions, as well, often from the visual and architectural language of mainstream gallery and museum culture. Only about two blocks from Boxwood's, the Swan Coach House is also located in the Buckhead heart of the domestic painting market, and like other nearby stores it is housed in a converted domestic structure; in this case, though, the building was an architect-designed auxiliary building for an elite residence rather than an

actual bourgeois home (*Figure 29*). In Chapter 6, I suggested that the local women who gather there for tea recognize the Coach House as a place of relational aesthetics (where relationships and aesthetics are intentionally connected), and that this quality of the space lends an air of authenticity to works seen there. But I turn to it now not because the way art is displayed there incrementally continues the pattern seen in the stores I've discussed so far, but because it seems to present such an apparently stark contrast to them, while nevertheless accentuating the conflict present throughout the market between public eye and the private body.

What the Swan Coach House does share with those other quasi-domestic retail spaces is the recognition that social connections between women are good business. The Coach House's own promotional copy translates the presumed importance of interpersonal relationships between women (especially friendships across generations, it seems – a literal kind of class reproduction) into monetary value: Grandmothers get a discount for bringing their grand-daughters to tea.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the gift shop is touted as offering an array of items seamlessly connecting interpersonal and domestic space: "From mementos for friends, birthday gifts, decorative home accessories or wedding presents, a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> *Swan Coach House Gift Shop*. 12 Feb., 2004. <<http://www.swancoachhouse.com/giftshop.html>>.

wonderful choices await you.”<sup>2</sup> And during the Christmas season, there is even an implicit connection between the roles of the gift shop and the gallery: the exhibition from November 20 - January 9, 2004, for instance, was called “Small Sketches II: A Holiday Show” and features “Over 70 small sketches by many of Georgia's most talented artists.” Unstated but understood is the phrase, “Perfect for Holiday gifts!” Indeed, even the physical layout of the Coach house reflects the hierarchy of relationship to aesthetics, with the gallery on the left rear of the ground floor and the gift shop on the right front, like two complementary legs that support the tea-rooms to which the entire second floor is devoted.

Yet the careful and explicit segregation of the gallery from gift shop (and hence, the segregation of their contents) indicates that the Coach House, rather than being the epitome of public social space for the domestic painting market, actually epitomizes the ideological tensions in the market, or – more accurately – between domestic painting’s intuitive vision and the dominant mode of visual culture in Atlanta’s connected worlds of art and design. Indeed, as a non-profit entity organized to support the city’s flagship High Museum of Art, the Coach House mines the residential, domestic arena to benefit the culture of explicitly ‘public’ art.<sup>3</sup> The gallery space itself is designed to be seen according

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<sup>2</sup> *Swan Coach House Gallery Schedule*. 12 Feb, 2004. <<http://www.swancoachhouse.com/gallerysched.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the ‘miners’ here – 12 “community minded” volunteers and “resourceful ladies” who opened the original Coach House as a Tea Room and Gift Shop on the grounds of the High

to the same long and strictly optical (and markedly un-domestic) views it provides for looking at the artworks displayed within it (*Figure 30*). A museum-like space, it provides none of the more proximate positions and (especially) views vis-à-vis “the wonderful choices” of the gift-shop, whose close quarters are only a few feet away. Though these two spaces and their different ways of relating to and understanding aesthetic objects are both overseen by the social space of “Southern hospitality” proffered by the Swan Coach House, it is the clarity of the differentiation that sets the Coach House apart from the commercial and quasi-commercial spaces discussed so far. But as a shopper continues to move away from the predominantly-residential parts of northwest Atlanta south towards the mid-town and downtown districts that house the city’s core of business and institutionalized high culture, this kind of spatial segregation becomes increasingly common.

### *Bennett Street*

As both Erika Reade, Ltd. and Boxwood’s emphasize “gifts” as part of what they provide for their customers – and so also the relational value of household goods – the implication is that even those artworks used in the store

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Museum – come from and embrace the local domestic scene with its particular social accent, as is clear from the on-line history of the Coach House: “The Swan Coach House continues to be a labor of love for the Forward Arts Foundation members. They continue to strive to create a Southern, hospitable atmosphere and hope that you will come by for a visit.”  
<<http://www.swancoachhouse.com/history.html>>

as visual keys for a display of decorative baubles can be used at home for a more personal and intimate purpose. At the Swan Coach House, the focus on (stereotypically genteel) relationships sugar-coats an intentional and highly-visible dissociation of artworks from the rest of the material culture of the private home. But in the various spaces along Bennett Street, the other geographic center of the domestic painting market, the same central conflict between visibility and authenticity takes the form of an increased emphasis on the “design” aspect of home-making (of arranging both art and furniture) at the expense of the explicitly relational goals of that process. More than at the Swan House, with its direct connections to the institutionalized high-art culture, art and the home are still tightly linked along Bennett Street, but the dynamic of looking across and into a represented domestic space rather than being *in* it continues to separate artworks from rooms, even as it unifies the way they are seen. There are still glimpses here of the social integration between producers, sellers and buyers of art, of the intentional projection of cooperation and community. But what is being purveyed is the idea that the home is primarily a site of visual consumption, to be visually consumed itself, with only cursory and perfunctory nods to the identity-forming character that is integral to the way it is understood in the more personalized version of bourgeois domesticity and its aesthetic.



Bennett Street is a two-block long dead-end street intersecting with Atlanta's main north-south artery, Peachtree Street, at the southern end of the city's northern quadrant. Topology divides it between a hilltop section where it joins Peachtree (through a parking lot) and a lower section bounded on the south and west by train tracks and an electrical substation, giving it a decidedly commercial if not light- industrial appearance and little to suggest to a casual observer that it has anything to do with either domesticity or art (Figure 31). At the upper end there are a half-dozen businesses arranged in two rows on either side of the street, including an oriental rug shop, three specializing in various antiques, and two art galleries – one a recent addition within the past several years. Halfway down the hill on the right are three or four other antique dealers, and a store that sells “designer antiques” (or custom-made semi-rustic case furniture and chairs). The bottom of the hill is taken up by four more converted warehouses: one is an art center offering instruction and studio rentals, another has both studios and galleries (including the Lowe Gallery--a large, self-consciously avant-garde one with another location in Los Angeles), and the last two are large showrooms divided into scores of small, almost cubicle-like spaces filled with furniture and decorative objects. The whole mosaic of businesses along Bennett Street is an example of the way high-arts, design, and home furnishings industries in Atlanta often share an overlapping physical (and

occasionally cultural) terrain, though the boundaries are actively disputed in private, at least. But I will concentrate on the two warehouses that are explicitly devoted to home furnishings, and that continue the trend towards a visualized presentation of domestic space in the market, with special attention to how artworks fit into such schemes.

Looking down the hill, the embellished warehouse halfway down on the right is the Interiors Market, while that at the bottom of the hill on the left is called The Stalls at Bennett Street, the latter an appropriate name for the dimensions of the individual display areas inside both buildings. Each small space (averaging 8 to 10 feet wide and deep) is rented from the building's owner, mostly by individual women as adjunct showrooms for their decorating trades. Except to drop off or pick up items from their displays, however, the renters are seldom actually there. Like the Interiors Market across the street, The Stalls has a small sales staff whose main role is to ring up purchases and give general directions; they will readily give the designer's contact information to a customer who has questions about specific items, but their knowledge of the individual stalls' contents is limited. Clearly, the relational component of the domestic painting market's retail aesthetic is not as important in these sales venues as it is to Erika Reade, Ltd., but a residual form remains in two ways: first, the front desks of both stores are attended by young to middle-age women who could just

as likely be customers as staff, and who can (and do) exchange pleasantries with shoppers as their peers; second, though women who maintain spaces in the buildings rent them individually and the proceeds from sales are attributed to the specific “shop” in which the item was discovered, the open, seemingly-permeable boundaries between them suggests an air of community, collegiality, and cooperation rather than one of competition.<sup>4</sup>

Along with the bare fact that artworks by domestic painters are sold in them, what is left to mark these collective show-rooms as part of the domestic painting market is a similarly attenuated version of the “look of home.” In the Stalls, each “room” has but three walls, with the fourth side open to one of the main pathways that lead shoppers to the rear of the building and then back around to the front; the visual experience of the Stalls, then, is comprised of looking into each scene from the no-man’s land of the open corridor outside it, while also seeing parts of the next ones down the line, with the promise of dozens more to come (*Figure 32*). Because the main thoroughfares are not laid out on a grid but as a main loop cut by several crossing paths, the full length of

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<sup>4</sup> The relatively low overhead (speaking figuratively, of course, given the warehouse environment) required to maintain a space in either of these buildings also contributes to the blurring of social boundaries between fully professionalized “designers,” interior decorators, and their peers who also enjoy shopping trips to England and Europe. Providing both display and storage for discoveries made in such quaint locales (and a tax-deductible business address, in effect) these buildings lower the investment threshold required to set up shop. As one interviewee put it, “It seems like everybody’s a decorator these days.” This assumed diffusion of aesthetic “expertise” throughout the market results in the most professionalized interior designers adopting highly individualized and *visualized* techniques to distinguish themselves from decorators.

the building is not viewable at once, but opens gradually as the shopper walks through, looking left and right into the displays she passes as she goes. The Interiors Market begets the same sort of cursory engagement, although it does have two main corridors running from the front to the back and the fairly uniform colors and textures of the wares displayed obscure the divisions between individual rooms (*Figure 33*). Though on an artificially large scale, this arrangement could be considered to reflect the kind of movement and sequential experience of space that I saw in the homes I studied, and it is certainly distinct from the experience of being in the retail space of a modern department store, say, where visibility across whole sections of the sales floor aids a shopper's navigation, but also her surveillance by store security.<sup>5</sup> Here, the dearth of staff coupled with the dozens of small cul-de-sacs created in and by the rooms within the overall dimensions of a warehouses means that a shopper may enjoy the illusion of privacy as she shops – at least until another shopper walks by or she seeks out the assistance of the women at the front.

But here even more so than in the case of Boxwood's, the semblance of domestic space (and movement) is accessible primarily via a detached visibility. Like the rooms in Boxwood's, most vendor's spaces here are crowded with objects of varying scales, from furniture to small pieces of china and jewelry,

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<sup>5</sup> The organization if not the physical arrangement also bears a resemblance to vendors' booths at a convention center trade show.

though not so densely-packed as to prevent the visitor from entering them for a better look. And though it is clearly one hope that something will catch the eye of a shopper walking through and lead her to a more leisurely and attentive perusal of the contents of the scene, the expectation is that the whole scene will usually be taken in at a glance, in passing, and from a vantage point outside of it, reinforcing the viewer's awareness of its physical shallowness. Indeed, the tableaux are presented to the viewer in much the same way a painting is held up for inspection in a non-domestic setting: to be looked at discretely, with no explicit connection to other works in the same space save that they, too, are framed and self-contained. In the Stalls, especially, this room-as-picture dynamic is a direct outgrowth of the fact that these scenes are both displays of objects available for retail sale and displays of their arranger's taste in furniture and accessories and skill in putting them together in an ensemble; they bespeak her personal (and therefore professional) style. Not fully realized rooms, much less authentic domestic spaces, they are advertisements for the decorators who maintain them and are partially informed by the conventions of print advertising visible in the regional decorating and residential interior design magazines. In other words, though the aggregate spaces of the Stalls at Bennett Street and the Interiors Market are oriented explicitly towards those outfitting their houses and are available for women looking for things useful in that interpersonal context,

the image of domesticity proffered here draws upon conventions of *representing* space rather than on the experience of symbolically meaningful spaces themselves.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth noting that this *cul de sac*-like terrain allows for a countercurrent to the main visual flow experienced by the roving shopper (perhaps now a *flâneuse*) by presenting her with these small vignettes laden with details and objects piled one atop another, as if to flood her with markers of cultural and personal associations she can claim as her own. The message is that, if she should step out of the main channel for a moment of private perusal she would be rewarded by seeing some of the things that were not immediately apparent, that were half-hidden, tucked-in, nestled among others. Certainly it is the intention of the purveyors to get the shopper to linger and purchase, but should the shopper be in the mood for it, this obvious strategy is met with appreciation rather than resistance. Remembering that shopping has both consumptive and recreational elements, desires can be addressed through the presentation to the *flâneuse* of all that she *could* possess. Even if these vignettes are incoherent and unintelligible by themselves, they represent commodity capitalism's bounty on one hand, and on the other hand, a treasure trove of signs

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<sup>6</sup> The way a visualized, personalized display becomes an indicator of a decorator's professional identity is only hinted at here (where the spaces are small and still tend to run together rather than being discrete), when compared to designers who market a distinctive, recognizable "look" specifically through magazine spreads. The intersection of domestic painting and such virtual spaces of the contemporary home and design industry is discussed below.

ripe for appropriation for her own domestic universe – her own collection of markers of self and relationships. In this way, partial barriers to sight and circuitous flow patterns invite intimate inspection and consideration of the dense small-scale, though the overall structure of these warehouse spaces is oriented towards visual understanding (and possessing) over distance.

Such is the strength of the room-as-picture dynamic visible on Bennett Street that it supplants the place of artworks as tools to lend coherence and intelligibility to complex scenes, to focus and concretize the intangible. Artworks in this context lose the particular character of the way they were integrated into lived (that is, personalized by living) space as ‘something different,’ and become subject to the same visual habits by which other products are seen and understood. In the Stalls, for instance, the small paintings included in many of the individual spaces are a hodgepodge of sizes, styles, and subjects, many of them anonymous antique still-lives. Most do not seem to play a major role in the arrangements in which they are placed, and have no particular connection to artists in the contemporary local market. But “being seen like” is not necessarily the same as “being seen with.” In both the Stalls and Interiors Market it is implicit that art and the bourgeois home are to be considered together, but the idea that a room should be seen from a distance as a singular thing partakes of the explicit visualization that was dissociated from the experience of artwork in

the actual home setting. Thus the dis-integration of an authentic domestic aesthetic (grounded in intuitive vision) can also be seen in the segregation of artworks from other furnishings, even within the larger home-oriented context: each building's most significant display of artwork occurs in a separate "scene" displayed in partial isolation from the other spaces. In the Stalls, this space is to one side at the front of the building — a visually-dominant wall of framed prints that is the off-site show room of a local high-end custom framer and print dealer, Fred Reed, Inc. (*Figure 34*). Across the street at the Interiors Market, a 20-foot long wall at the back of the building was the first permanent display for the works of artists represented by Anne Irwin, herself.

It is not surprising that Mrs. Irwin should maintain a display space in addition to her home and Erika Reade, Ltd., nor that she should do so on Bennett Street. This specific location suited her when all she needed from the space was a relatively low-cost and accessible place to send clients to get a feel for the work she carried or see specific items they might like to try out at home. But her visible presence on Bennett Street did not translate into — or have almost any of the character of — her personal presence showing works at her home; this was an exclusively public display of artworks, without even an implication of the relational content of her own domestic space. Considering Mrs. Irwin's central role in the domestic painting market, the contrast between the physical venues



she maintained nicely points up the distinction between the way domestic paintings are experienced and presented in intrinsically private rooms (even when used for display and sale) and the way they are presented for public consumption in spaces where the domestic painting market intersects with the mainstream commercial (visual) marketplace: in the private home, animated as it is by the experiential identities of individuals, families, friends, *art is seen as part of the room*, and as part of the concrete experience of being in it; in the public marketplace, to the extent that a space lacks the concrete traces of living, *the room is seen as part of Art*, defined by the abstract, detached and distant gaze.

### *Dream Houses*

Though the linkage between art and the home remains strong in both scenarios above, in the latter, even “home” begins to be understood through the lens of visual properties and is gradually transformed from an arena of spatial practice to one dominated by sight: the “look of home” gets confused with the thing itself. This confusion is the central character of the last class of physical spaces that contribute to the complete social space of the domestic painting market. Yet they are hardly real spaces at all, and only partially physical ones; they exist primarily as an aggregate of *representations* of commercial spaces devoted to furnishings (including some of the shops I’ve discussed), “interiors”

re-made by the controlling visions of designers and architects, and houses made in the first place to be three-dimensional models of the images shown in decorating magazines. Indeed, if an artist's home studio marks the complete integration of a phenomenological aesthetic of the bourgeois home, intuitive vision, and the economic requirements of domestic painting market, at the opposite end of the authenticity continuum of spaces are houses built and decorated not to be lived in, but *to be seen*, especially through the mediations of photography and magazine copy-writing. These "idea houses" represent the culmination of the divorce of the relational content of domesticity from the form of the bourgeois home with its artworks, and the epitome of why Lefebvre critiqued modern life as being consumed with images and representations at the expense of practical space.<sup>7</sup>

Regional decorating and "lifestyle" magazines, especially – *Southern Living*, *Southern Accents*, and *Veranda* – are widely read (or looked at) among the women of the domestic painting market, though national publications like *Architectural Digest* were not uncommon, especially in the more affluent homes I studied. Those publications devoted most specifically to the outfitting of

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<sup>7</sup> Though this usage refers specifically to houses built for *Southern Living Magazine* and its sister publication *Southern Accents* and discussed below, "decorator show houses" are a similar, more widespread phenomenon. Such buildings are nearly always speculatively constructed houses (often in and advertising a new, exclusive development), decorated by a well-known local designers, then opened to the public for paid tours, the proceeds from which usually go to a charitable civic cause, like the local symphony. Afterwards, the houses are sold as private residences, now with an extra cachet.

southern homes were also occasionally mentioned by interviewees as “somewhere to get ideas” for the arrangement of their own houses. But though there is much to say about the way these magazines offer prescriptions for how the contemporary bourgeois home is supposed to look, and how they fit into the long history of advice literature for the American housewife, I will focus instead on the way their pages are an extension of the sales space of the domestic painting market and the culmination of the dynamic of increasing visibility of both artwork and contrived quasi-domestic spaces.

Several shops of the kind I’ve described above expanded their virtual space in the marketplace through ads in these magazines that are, themselves, first and foremost about advertising. More than half of their interior pages are given to either full-page ads for makers of carpets, furniture, drapery, and cabinet hardware, and most of the rest have at least side-bar ads for these goods or for local shops that sell antiques and other accessories. Readers can barely escape the fact that what they are looking at is a guide for “where to get it for yourself” as much as a praise-filled description of what others have already got. But more to the point, the advertising in these magazines reveals a concrete world transformed by and for the sake of visual representation, using techniques that continue the distancing of the eye (not to mention body) from the home and its objects. Ads in *Veranda* and *Southern Accents* for antique and accessory shops

in Atlanta and across the South typically show a cluster of objects and furniture set against a painted wall (just as often in a photographer's studio as in the shop itself) and viewed from such a distance that the whole scene may be taken in at a glance, precisely as was the case when looking into the rooms at Boxwood's. Yet in print ads much more than in retail shops, foreground space is completely absent, the clues it might give to a body's physical location being irrelevant to what the reader recognizes as the view through the lens of a camera. This purely optical space is not "real" social space (even of the shops it advertises); moreover, it isn't meant to be real, and thus has no need for allusions to livable space, much less the presence of human identity.<sup>8</sup>

Especially in her earlier years, Mrs. Irwin also occasionally took out ads for her artists in *Veranda*, and even conformed her presentation of art to the standard gallery-ad model of showing paintings floating unframed and decontextualized on a plain background, while below were listed her contact information and the title and artist of the works. But her great marketing coup was to have the work of her artists featured as part of the interiors shown in the feature articles of the 1994, 1995, and 1996 Idea House issues of *Southern Living*.

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<sup>8</sup> Interesting exceptions to this rule are the ads of Reade's shop, which stand out for their complete lack of photographic representation. Instead, an ad that ran for several years in *Veranda* features only a simple line-drawing and written description of a crystal bowl hand-etched with a quote from Emerson naming "A friend" as the "highest creation of Nature." The ad begins with the statement, "We think this is the perfect gift," reinforcing the relational focus on several levels, from the consensus implied in the determination of the "perfect gift," to the idea that the perfect gift is one that explicitly (as well as implicitly) honors friendship.

This guaranteed that many more and more geographically-dispersed people would see the work of her artists than could actually visit her wall in the Interiors Market, and the paintings would be seen as part of a home-like setting. But while this strategy seems on the surface to be consistent with the goal of showing artworks as they are really seen in the context of the home, in reality, the rooms shown in *Southern Living* and other magazines reduce the experience of domestic space to the play of forms and surfaces that are every bit as subject to the distortions of the view through the camera as are the shop ads in which everything is shoved against a studio wall. The subtle mediation of the photographic process accentuates the distance and detachment between viewer and the scene pictured, giving views that are impossible with the eye alone, and making spaces appear larger and deeper than they really are, while simultaneously flattening them on the page. In fact, many photos are taken from an adjoining room, but with a long lens that literally projects the point of view forward to retain the perspective given by distance while dispensing with (cropping out) the foreground. Others are taken with wide-angle lenses that bring more of the room into a single view than could be seen by a viewer *in situ*, again relying on judicious cropping to do away with the image margins where

the distortion becomes most obvious.<sup>9</sup> In such cases, there is an additional void subtly inserted between the viewer and the space pictured.

Yet on the other hand, it is also entirely consistent for the interiors pictured in magazine spreads to be subject to the same visual transformations that are applied to the non-spaces in advertisements, since the rooms themselves are no less contrived and manipulated for the sake of visibility than are displays of wares portrayed as rooms — these spaces, too, are advertisements, and not just for the furniture, fabrics and paintings that decorate them. They are designed to be looked at through the photographic medium as testaments to the creative work of either designer, architect or both, speaking about their ability to transform concrete space according to abstract plans and their personal tastes or recognizable (thus marketable) style. This fact is attested to by the credits given at the beginning of the articles that list architect and designer, and then always the photographer who rendered the space for publication as its authors. But just as important is who is *not* usually included in the credits for the space: residents or owners often go unmentioned, except in passing in the body text, *unless* they themselves are designers, architects, or (an interesting equivalency here) art collectors. Otherwise, the reader can assume that the artworks that are often

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<sup>9</sup> Virtual house tours on the magazines' internet sites are an extreme example of the strange way rooms are "made visible" through photographic processes, giving the illusion of total visibility, but only from a single fixed, decontextualizing position. (See [www.southernaccents.com/accents/homes/ideahouses/](http://www.southernaccents.com/accents/homes/ideahouses/))

featured prominently have been selected or collected by the designer of the space rather than the inhabitant of the house. In most cases then, these “real” homes are drained of the evidence of ordinary inhabitation and physical bodily presence in order to assert the visual qualities of the space as conceived of by the designer, a process insured by members of the photographer’s crew whose job it is to systematically clean the house of all traces of disorder and individual presence – in short, of domesticity. The optical distortion of domestic space by the camera lens has a corollary, then, produced by the cultural lens that treats the private home as a canvas for the independent creative work of the designer, altering the relationship of domestic space to art, and even its relationship to living.

*Southern Living Magazine* has a broader range of content (vacation spots, gardening ideas, children’s crafts, recipes, etc., in addition to suggestions for household “makeovers”) and caters to a less affluent readership than do the publications explicitly and more exclusively devoted to interior design. It also tends to focus on a do-it-yourself demographic rather than one looking to retain “name brand” designers and architects, and has for many years published a series of house plans available to the public as starting points for customized homes. Yet despite its populist bent, *Southern Living* surpasses the other publications’ efforts to create the simulacra of authentic domestic space by

annually constructing their own “Idea houses” (usually in 3 different markets across the south), hiring local decorators to outfit them, and publishing them in a special, photography-laden issue. The houses are open locally to be toured, as well, and a different exhibition catalogue of sorts is distributed on-site to those who wish to see yet another camera-mediated version of the space through which they are about to walk.<sup>10</sup> Again, these spaces were designed to be seen and to be seen through the camera lens, but in this case they never *were* inhabited, despite the degree to which they are filled with small items meant to evoke an ideal but imaginary family, including “family photographs” and locally-produced artworks.<sup>11</sup>

Without the actual practice of living (including memory and relationship) to guide the placement and experience of the paintings in these quasi-domestic spaces, art’s connection to the space of the room falls back solely and soullessly on its visual and ultimately decorative values, a fact amply demonstrated in the idea houses that featured works by domestic painters handled by Mrs. Irwin.

Echoing an amplified sort of reflexivity derived from the practices of the home

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<sup>10</sup> The other principal aim of the guide/catalogue is to credit the various suppliers of appliances, construction materials and expertise that went into the house (the “sponsors”). After all, this instance of “landscape tourism” is designed to encourage tourists to remake their own domestic landscapes using the goods and services that make the Idea House look as it does, or even build their own version based on the available plans for the Idea House itself.

<sup>11</sup> Mary McWilliams, the designer/author of the Cumberland Cottage describes how she “always remembered the mythical family that would live in our Idea House. . . . We have family photographs scattered around the house—framed memories I call them. We want everyone who visits to feel as though the family has just stepped out for a moment, to let you peek in, and will be right back.” *Southern Living Magazine*, August 1994: p. 80, 84.



but better illustrated in Boxwood's room of fruit, (*Figure 35*) shows two oil-on-canvas teacup paintings on the right-hand wall of the dining room in the 1994 Cumberland River Cottage Idea House in Nashville.<sup>12</sup> Since there can be no truly "personal" history to the dishes in this scene, the paintings merely serve to reflect and continue the display of china in the glass-front hutch on the far wall of the dining room, as seen from the remote vantage point of the camera position. But even were the viewer in the dining room, the position of the paintings in relation to the chairs and table and relatively high on the wall makes it unlikely that they would serve as a visual focus, especially when the room is so crowded with other, larger, similarly-colored items vying for a viewer's attention; the intimacy and quietness that the pair of solitary teacups might suggest in a breakfast room or kitchen of a lived-in house seems especially out of place in proximity to the over-rich formality of the set table.

Though the paintings can serve little purpose other than as visual filler in the dining room, the visual connection between room and painting is explicit and more insistent in *Figure 36*, to the extent that the room shown seems to have been arranged and its fabrics chosen to closely mirror the domestic scene in the painting. The green wicker chair appears in both spaces, though the floral upholstery in the painted version has been replaced with striped fabric in the

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<sup>12</sup> *Southern Living Magazine*, August 1994:p.80.

room, to more securely link the sofa in the painting with its twin and the chair in the room. The square coffee table appears in both places, too, and the painting's flowering topiary is repeated on a smaller scale in the potted geraniums by the hearth. The visual details of the artwork are mined not just for colors or forms, but to recreate a visual sum total from the individual parts of the painting. Going beyond the kind of spatial/practical mirror effect I discussed in chapter 5, here the reflection between the painting and room is so complete that the viewer half expects to find an image of a painting of a room in the painting itself, completing the already visualized scene with a *trompe l'oeil* infinite regression.

While this excessive coordination is certainly observable from within the space, it is inescapable when seen in the magazine, where both painting and room can be taken in as one view, as one unified image. One can easily imagine a visitor to the Idea House having an even more literal infinite regression experience when standing, magazine photo in hand, in the very hallway from which the picture was taken. Yet the key point here is that when domestic spaces are designed according to the readily *visible* logic of arrangement, to be viewed from a remote vantage point, mediated by mechanical reproduction and packaged for visual consumption in magazines, the interiors produced turn out to be almost inescapably exterior – a condition fundamentally at odds with the identity-laden meanings attributed to both “art” and “home” in the private

spaces of the domestic painting market. While elite homes may have the identities of their residents extracted literally “by design” during the process of being pictured in glossy interior design magazines, and hence the artwork in them may be just as vacant of personal meaning, it is the paradox of the populist Idea Houses that the attempt to re-humanize designed space relies on strictly visual techniques that highlight the superficial qualities of domestic paintings while subverting their promise as markers of relationship and identity.

### *Mixed Messages*

It is perhaps ironic that Anne Irwin should use such quasi-real spaces as the *Southern Living* Idea Houses to demonstrate how art can and should be part of the environment of the bourgeois home, since such a strategy projects a false image of the rationales by which artwork is typically chosen for the home and reinforces strictly visual practices which I found to be of only secondary importance among the women I interviewed, including Mrs. Irwin herself. Though “everybody is a decorator” in Atlanta, few thought of themselves or acted like “designers,” at least when that term carries the connotation of the pursuit of a projected visual order. Even among the self-identified designers whom I interviewed (and who, as a group, make up a majority of Mrs. Irwin’s repeat customers), very few couched their professional practices (much less their

identities) in terms of their own creative intentions rendered as a “vision.” Most designers saw their role vis-à-vis artworks in the home as helping their clients experience their previously-acquired artworks in new ways through different juxtapositions and placements within the house, often taking advantage of the family’s preexisting paths of movement. Meanwhile, assisting the residents in clarifying and articulating their own tastes and preferences was a prerequisite to guiding them to sources of new paintings consistent with them, both processes thought to hinge on building a relationship between the designer and homeowner that blurred the boundaries between professional and personal.<sup>13</sup> In other words, despite the frequency and diversity with which the “look of home” is deployed in the marketplace to indicate that the paintings, artists, and sellers belong to a common culture of domesticity, all seem to understand and agree that it is the “feel of home” that most informs choice and valuation of art.

Given the widespread claim in the market that art should be bought for reasons of personal, even emotional association rather than exclusively on account of its narrowly aesthetic qualities, what does one make of the insistently visual character of many of the public spaces in which domestic paintings are

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<sup>13</sup> The high degree to which my interviewees were engaged with their own aesthetic environments and artworks was evident in the enthusiasm with which they told stories about where artworks came from and why they were placed as they were. They also tended to seek out designers who were already friends, or eventually became friends with those who helped them arrange their homes. Only one woman told me that the hired decorator had picked and placed the art in her home, and was unable to give more information about them than “they look nice there.”

sold? Perhaps the situation derives from the introduction of sales and marketing practices common elsewhere in the consumer economy, with its focus on superficial appearance as the (only) means by which to differentiate between otherwise similar products. On the other hand, since each step away from the home studio and sale and towards Bennett Street is also a step towards studio and gallery space intentionally bereft of the traces of bourgeois domesticity,<sup>14</sup> it may be that increasing visibility in the public spaces of the market are a reflection of increasing accommodation to the habits, values and *expectations* of the avant-garde artworld, even if the paintings displayed are anything but “cutting edge.” At a home show attended by invited guests and their friends, the public is a known quantity, as are its judgments about the appropriateness of mixing art and domesticity; but projecting the right image – or first impression – is more problematic in spaces available to the unknown casual visitor, especially those who might have come to the area looking for a nearby traditionally-arranged gallery, instead. Thus the more these sites are public and proximate to venues that conform to the dominant ways of showing artworks, the more carefully do domestic painting’s participants attempt to strike a balance between two distinct hierarchies of value. Often this means that the still-central relational aspects of

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<sup>14</sup> The spaces in the TULA art center at the bottom of Bennett Street are decidedly anti-domestic, and even industrial, which befits the aesthetics of its largest single tenant, the Lowe Gallery. The artist studios that fill most of the space are also explicitly non-private and open to full public surveillance, arranged around a central two-story atrium with only glass walls separating each space from the public walkways.

art are relegated to private conversations while the visual field is ceded to the dominant practices of display; in other words, the way art is *shown*, especially in public, is distinguished from the way it is *talked about*, especially in private.

Indeed, Mrs. Irwin, herself, provides a final example of the adaptability (or apparent accommodation) of domestic painting to customary art practices when her professional choices of venues in which to show artworks are compared to the way she has talked about art and her business, both played out over time as well as space. After the better part of a decade using the single wall in the Interiors Market to set artworks apart from the cacophony of other merchandise in a significant but not radical way, she worked with the building's owner to carve out a distinct three-bayed space for herself and her artworks at the right rear corner of the building, brought on a former decorator as part-time gallery assistant and liaison with designers, and had a sign bearing her own name put over the side door, giving direct access to the art-dedicated section of the Market. Still, there was access to the space from the adjacent object-laden maze as well as through her newly-separate entrance, continuing the explicit physical as well as visual linkage between the paintings she sold and other home accessories available in the building. But at the end of 2001, she had moved up to an end unit of the row of single-story businesses at the top of the hill, on the right side and directly across from the already highly-visible Bennett Street Gallery

(*Figure 37 and Figure 38*). In so doing, Mrs. Irwin completed the transition to a space fully and exclusively devoted to paintings, but also to one divorced from the way of seeing that explicitly contextualizes artworks within the private interior.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, these physical shifts were paralleled by less clear-cut changes in the language she used to talk about herself and art: she began with the name “Folio des Artistes,” though by the late 1990s she was adding the explanatory phrase “Anne Irwin’s Atlanta gallery” to some of her post-cards. She then asserted the fact of her new independent physical presence in the Interiors Market by dropping the “Folio” name and adopting “Anne Irwin Gallery,” finally settling on “Anne Irwin Fine Art” as she eyed the newly-available space up the hill. Despite the very conventionally gallery-like appearance of her new space (or maybe because of it), dispensing with the word “gallery” in her name softly signals difference between her business and a normal gallery, hinting that, no matter how the space *looks*, friendships were still the heart of her business and the art she sold. For buyers this meant a continuing emphasis on interpersonal relationships and her expectation that they would purchase art for their own

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<sup>15</sup> The case of artist Anne Hathaway provides an interesting contrast to Irwin’s relocation. For several years Hathaway had made an old table in Bittersweet Antiques (halfway down the hill on the right) her public studio, creating large-scale watercolors of stylized animals. As she began to use her graphically sophisticated paintings as the basis for branded personal accessories (throw pillows, scarves, etc.), she, too, was able to afford a space of her own, but chose not to segregate her art from the furnishings context. Instead, she opened a shop across Bennett Street that offers “cottage antiques” and old millstones, as well as serving as backdrop for her artworks.

homes or as gifts, rather than because they consider themselves *primarily* art “collectors.” For, though it has appeared with regularity in her promotional literature, that last term is used in ways that assert a connection to (or legitimacy in the terms of) the mainline art world while not alienating her less artworld-prestige conscious and “knowledgeable” customers.<sup>16</sup>

For her artists, the name suggested benefits beyond those to be expected from a traditional gallery, one of which was emphasizing the identity of artists in intimate social terms rather than in terms of autonomy and genius: a June 2003 show featuring works of a long-represented artist in combination with those of her two daughters was titled, “Like Mother, Like Daughters.” But most essential was her continuing strategy of showing their work in places that differently self-conscious galleries (or artists) might consider to have a diluting effect on their artworld prestige, but which nevertheless increases their visibility to a broader range of potential buyers. Mrs. Irwin continued to place art for Erika Reade, Ltd., and sought out similar stores in popular regional vacation destinations like Sea Island, Georgia and Cashiers, North Carolina; she pursued agreements with mail-order home furnishings catalogues like the Horchow Collection to sell

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<sup>16</sup> Her oversized postcard for her “14<sup>th</sup> Annual Spring Salon Show (June 7-18, 2001 – the last such show in the Interiors Market) announced this still-central role for art by including the phrase, “Perfect gifts for weddings and graduations.” As for the use of “collector,” her standard postcard copy for several years in the mid-1990s was the slightly casual (even chatty) “A Southern Eye for Southern Art: Collectors with a penchant for paintings by regional artists will find Anne Irwin’s Atlanta gallery – Folio des Artistes – to be the perfect place to discover works by some of the South’s finest.”



prints; and – most importantly in terms of institutionalizing a domestic aesthetic – she continued to provide artworks for local decorator’s show houses and *Southern Living’s* Idea Houses. Together, the spaces and the promotional statements of Mrs. Irwin’s practice tell different versions of the same story for differently-attuned audiences: the subject remains domestic painting, and while her gallery space claims a place for it in terms recognizable to anyone familiar with a placeless “contemporary fine art,” the other aspects of her practice speak in lower, but equally clear tones that painting in Atlanta is still vitally connected to the domestic environment, albeit through highly visualized, market-ready, but still ostensibly “local” versions of the home.

Finally, then, perhaps the ways commercial spaces distort and attenuate the practical aspects of the domesticity to which they allude are so obvious to those steeped in the “real thing” that such distortions are easily recognized and discounted as the economic exigencies that they are. In other words, perhaps they, too, are a way to talk about art, but in a stylized, ritualized, public kind of speech, rather than the parlance of everyday life; meanwhile, the native language may continue to be spoken at home. Indeed, thinking of the marketplace as a site of active negotiation between different languages of art, domesticity, and cultural identity suggests that there will inevitably be borrowings and adoptions of terms from one context to another in which nuance and even substantive meaning gets

lost in translation—precisely the kind of thing that leads to arguments over linguistic purity and efforts to control how and where the official vocabulary may be used. Yet if the marketplace is not only where its actors announce their collective social identity to wider circles of culture, but also a critical venue in which to communicate and negotiate internally about these key definitions, then such conflicted and equivocal statements as occur in Boxwood's, the Stalls at Bennett Street, Idea Houses, and Mrs. Irwin's own gallery complicate the problem of determining what constitutes an "authentic" bourgeois domesticity in contemporary Atlanta and— even more— where art fits within it.

*Figures for Chapter VII.*

Figure 29



Swan Coach House façade, as pictured on its website, February 2004

Figure 30



The Gallery at Swan Coach House as pictured on its website, February 2004.

Figure 31



Looking down the hill on Bennett Street, Atlanta. July 2002.

Figure 32



Interior of the Stalls at Bennett Street, Atlanta. July 2002.

Figure 33



Interior view of the Interiors Market, Atlanta. July 2002.

Figure 34



Display of prints at the Stalls at Bennett Street



Figure 35



Illustration of the dining room from the 1994 *Southern Living* Idea House "Cumberland River Cottage," August, 1994, p. 80. The two teacup paintings on the right are by Katherine Brown.

Figure 36



View of the "Keeping Room" from the "Cumberland River Cottage," *Southern Living*, August, 1994: p. 84. The painting over the mantel is by Claudia Hartley.

Figure 37



Exterior view of Anne Irwin Fine Art, Bennett Street (at left). Fall 2003.

Figure 38



Interior view of Anne Irwin Fine Art, Bennett Street. Fall 2003.

## Conclusion: Painting the Bourgeois Interior

The eschatological vision structuring the opposition between avant-garde and 'bourgeois' art . . . helps to disguise the true relationship between the field of cultural production and the field of power, by reproducing the opposition (which does not rule out complementarity) between the dominated and dominant fractions of the dominant class, between cultural power . . . and economic power . . . in the transfigured form of the conflict between two aesthetics. Specifically aesthetic conflicts about the legitimate vision of the world . . . are political conflicts . . . for the power to impose the dominant definition of reality, and social reality in particular.

— Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, pp. 101-2.

The [domestic] artistic praxis . . . is not of an artist stamping his or her mark upon material or of reshaping recalcitrant feminine matter into redemptive masculine form. Rather, it is of a practice that gives in to the environmental "material," that works with it in a dialogical fashion, that recognizes that moments of being inhere in the everyday world, seeing art as a means of momentarily capturing or highlighting or simply attending to those moments.

— Josephine Donovan, "Everyday Use and Moments of Being," p. 64.<sup>1</sup>

By beginning this dissertation with the question, "What does it mean to be 'at home' with art?" I was asking whether it is possible for art to cohabitate with bourgeois domesticity; that is, I was asking whether or not art—conceived as a special class of symbolic objects—can be a part of the domestic interior without rendering the space of the home into merely a stage-set for its display, or being itself reduced to "decoration" and drained of its ability to conjure an authentic aesthetic experience. But even framing the question thus (all the more seeking to

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<sup>1</sup> Donovan, Josephine. "Everyday Use and Moments of Being," in Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993: 53-67.

answer it in a contemporary setting) called attention to the ideologically-freighted, contested terms “art,” “aesthetic,” “decoration,” and “domesticity,” and highlighted the difficulty of teasing all their connotations from the various texts in which they are inscribed. Therefore, it was necessary to look at how critical writing about art has often been constrained and perversely energized by defining “art” in opposition to “decoration” and “bourgeois,” before exploring the way the women of Atlanta’s domestic painting market have negotiated the polarized visual field of arts (and all of these terms) in their daily practice of making, selling and living with paintings. Now, having described the landscape in which domestic paintings are encountered and the perspectives from which they are seen, it is time to revisit “decoration” and “bourgeois art” in the light of this particular domesticity, and not just as descriptors of practices and objects in the home, but as tools for marking ideological boundaries.

### *Decoration and Design*

Decoration, like art, is an historically-conditioned set of practices that is not the same always or everywhere. What practices constitute decoration at any given instance (and how gendered associations are imposed upon them or expressed through them) depend on their interaction with other social and economic practices, especially with those having to do with the marketing and

consumption of commodities on the one hand, and on the other hand, with the habits of domesticity. But “decoration” is also a title – or epithet – used not just to describe a set (or sets) of practices, but to denote the speaker’s attitudes toward them and the cultural values with which they are associated. Who is using the term and to whose activities it is being applied are of utmost importance to its meaning, such that a speaker’s use of “decoration” may be taken as an indicator of his or her position vis-à-vis art in the bourgeois interior, even suggesting the place (both literally and figuratively) paintings will occupy in his or her own home or in homes he or she designs; how it is used may also indicate the prestige of his or her position in the hierarchy of the field of culture. Such power has the word to define these positions that sometimes an oblique reference to it is all that’s necessary, as with the case of the bumper sticker phrase that began my consideration of ideological boundary-marking: “GOOD ART WON’T MATCH YOUR SOFA” leaves “decoration” unsaid, but defines the practice of decoration, nevertheless, as being epitomized by matching paintings to upholstery.

“Swatch-matching” has come to stand for the whole set of practices and assumptions about art that are typically *ascribed* to bourgeois women, especially, by those who are (or wish to be) associated with the avant-garde and high-art markets. The term is meant to connote the kind of display of paintings in the

home that accompanies a shallow and superficial understanding (if any at all) of the purposes of autonomous, modernist art, including the role of artworks as the embodied self-expressions of the artist, a genius set apart from ordinary experience. "Decoration" used synonymously with "swatch-matching" therefore contains a critique in two related parts: the first addresses the proper role of visual order, and the second concerns a hierarchy of self-expression, the second being the more important. Indeed, the implication is that the consumer called a "swatch-person" has the audacity to subjugate the agency embodied in the creative work of the artist to his or her own desire to "express myself" by displaying his or her taste in colors, textures, and subjects. In these cases, the consumer's self is likewise assumed to be shallow and superficial, concerned primarily with satisfaction and comfort rather than the advance of culture, so "self-expression" is limited to the base technical achievement of getting a piece of fabric that exactly replicates this pink or that bright green in a painting, or vice versa, often accomplished with the aid of a professional decorator trained to manage such appearances. Since the special self-expression of the artist is the critical element in the very definition of modernist art (whether it be currently considered "avant-garde" or has already been swept into history and become part of the institutions of "high-art"), such willful ignorance of this aspect means that paintings used in this version of decoration all but cease to be art, and are



relegated to the reified world of commodities and products for visual consumption.

But as my description of the aesthetic system and habits of domesticity in Atlanta showed, the purposes to which artworks are being put in bourgeois homes are more complicated than swatch-matching, and the social space to which they contribute is anything but superficial or shallow; quite the contrary, artworks are key elements in the homes I studied that enable their inhabitants to experience them as arenas with *depth*, both relational/memorial and physical. What's more, while visual reflexivity was certainly a tool used to integrate paintings and their household surroundings, looking at the spaces in which paintings were displayed and marketed suggested that "superficial" qualities of paintings and interiors became more and more important the further one moved from residential spaces towards commercial ones. So while the avant-garde account of 'decoration' is correct in claiming that the more the goals of a space are aligned with commercial interests the more they emphasize the consumption of artworks as visual commodities, it was also true that the practices of the market indicated a closer alliance between visual commodification and *avant-garde*-inspired display practices than between visual commodification and the practice of domestic aesthetics. I am suggesting, then, that art-aligned "design" and gallery-oriented art has more in common with the techniques and goals of

advanced consumer capitalism than does decoration as it is practiced in many bourgeois homes.

Put another way and in the most mundane context, the art-savvy use “design” to distinguish what they do from allegedly-superficial “decoration,” but in the domestic painting market designers were actually distinguished by their attention to a “look” (often their own distinctive one) at the expense of authentic connection of objects and their arrangement to the identity and experience of home’s inhabitants. Under the art-informed system of design, the character of visual order in a house should flow from the hierarchy of self-expression placing that of the artist above that of the ordinary resident, just as it privileges the artist’s vision over that of a collector. The inhabitants’ *living* is not the primary organizing principle for the domestic space, for the space must be arranged according to the requirements of the unified vision or the art objects themselves; these requirements, it turns out, are highly superficial (pertaining to the arrangement and coloration of surfaces) and almost exclusively about affording and emphasizing sightlines for a privileged viewer – not necessarily the resident, even, but visitors. If local, personal identity is subjugated to the identity of an absent artist (abstracted and symbolically alienated from his or her person by the form of the work of art), then the space of living – or, how the space is lived – must also be subordinated to the abstract space of the artwork. The attribution of “meaninglessness” to bourgeois decoration is revealed as a

clever re-attribution of modernism's own reifying habits (more rightly named "disinterestedness") onto those of the bourgeois housewife:

The spectator/speculator is elevated by the goods that he controls, and these are reverentially placed in temples which celebrate the owner as well as the objects. Visitors approach them piously (disinterestedly), setting aside the concerns of ordinary living for temporary relief and contemplation. . . .To make ethically sound or aesthetically valid assessments, a person must exercise such a purified faculty, or, in a more recent vein, by volitional self-voidance dissociate herself from personal, "interested" associations with the object or situation experienced.<sup>2</sup>

The subtleties of boundary-marking appear when we consider the following: that superficial visual practices are actually more indicative of the design world (those likely to use the bumper-sticker) than of bourgeois decoration doesn't undermine the position of designers with regards to modernist art, but actually reinforces their allegiance to and role in support of its ideology. Because of its proximity to, even intersection with bourgeois domesticity (however poorly understood) and the confusion about what sets design apart from decoration, design culture holds a tenuous and marginal – but still structurally necessary – position in the field of art to which it so desperately wants to belong. To turn familiar terms around, "design" is "decoration" barely domesticated into the household of art, now guarding the camp from its close kin still circling in the darkness of bourgeois self-consciousness. Its ideological roles

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<sup>2</sup> Hilde Hein, "Refining Feminist Theory: Lessons from Aesthetics," in Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993: p.11.

are: first, to highlight the purity and superiority of other cultural practices further up the hierarchy (architecture, museum-consecrated art, and then avant-garde production) by making a public show of its own submission; second, to be castigated for alleged crimes against art's autonomy (and purported anti-market ideology) that would otherwise be directed at more prestigious classes within the culture (e.g., gallery owners who express narrowly economic self-interest in wanting a "cut" from artist's studio sales); and third, to receive the criticism and rebuke really directed at its still-un-housebroken cousins. Designers and their vision of the home are made to stand for decorators and the practices of domesticity, since decoration and other "clearly bourgeois" practices can't be admitted to have direct effects inside the field of art. Thus avant-garde culture can claim to have tamed the bourgeois beast by proxy, without actually facing the thing itself (that is, without explaining why art in the service of bourgeois identity is necessarily bad), without conceding that a domestic art might pose an ideological challenge, and without even admitting that it exists at all.

This dynamic of substitution is likely the point of such statements as "GOOD ART WON'T MATCH YOUR SOFA" in the first place, and the polemical use of that phrase and the term "decoration" seems to always reveal insecurity either about the speaker's own perceived position in the field of art, or about the autonomy of the field itself from the dynamics of the bourgeois marketplace, or both. Calling someone a "swatch person" may be taken as a classic case of the

designation of an “other,” which is really an act of self-definition for the speaker. What we find is that the phrase is not ultimately talking about the practices of someone else, or of a class of someone else-s, even, but about the speaker’s own practices: “I do not make sofa-matching a priority in choosing my paintings.” Thus in 1994, Katherine Pearson began her column in *Southern Accents* with a now-familiar sentiment:

“Good Art Won’t Match Your Sofa,” is the message on one of my favorite T-shirts. As Editorial Director of an interior design—some would say “decorating”—magazine, I feel compelled to tell you that I endorse that message. However, I am often asked how to incorporate art into a home in a decorative sense, and I feel that everyone should do that. Why? Because original art, the product of a single hand and mind, brings life and individuality to any home. . . If you respond emotionally to a piece of art enough to purchase and display it, then that artwork tells a visitor not only something about the artist, but also something about the person who now owns it.<sup>3</sup>

The tone of the writing here is studiously-sincere respect for “real art” and the cultural construction of the artist, while acknowledging design’s low, but—by virtue of its very obeisance—still included status. Lest there be (understandable) confusion, or doubt, the writer “feels compelled” to assure her readers (herself?) that she recognizes and agrees with the idea that art is an autonomous field for the expression of the identities of the artists above all else. On the other hand, her use of “decorative sense” and “decorating magazine” seems to be a tacit admission of the persistence, even appropriateness of the

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<sup>3</sup> Pearson, Katherine. “Editor’s Notes,” *Southern Accents* v.17 no.5 (Sept-Oct 1994): 22.

alternative practice of using artworks for the *homeowner's* self-expression.

Bourgeois values have crept in, but only for the purpose of being harnessed and put to work for the idea of the artist again: "life and individuality" may be brought to the home by adopting the cultural work of "a single hand and mind," though they are of the artist rather than those of the resident. Furthermore, "telling something about the artist" comes ahead of "telling something about the owner." In fact, the very prominence of "telling" is a final indication that the purpose of "design" is to encourage the arrangement of physical structures as well as the popular conception of the domestic space as an outward-directed presentation of the self-as-statement, to be received visually, at a distance, rather than experienced as an ongoing practice and rehearsal of identity for the home's inhabitants and their intimate friends. Such a form of domesticity preserves the privileged place of (and market for) the artwork by colonizing the home with the alienated perceptual dynamics of autonomous art, which also happen to be characteristic of the post-modern marketplace of images and signs.

### *Decoration, Domesticity and Aesthetics*

If the design community constitutes the lowest end of the field of restricted production and autonomous art, representing in its practices an abstracted and, thus, euphemized version of the sofa-matching usually attributed to bourgeois homemakers, what does decoration signify when approached from

those perspectives not explicitly aligned against bourgeois domesticity? How might decoration appear through the lens of the experiences and ideology of the homemakers themselves? I have already described the alternative experiential habits (that is, the combination of sight and movement, rather than a dominant visual field) common in the spaces of private bourgeois homes in Atlanta, but have not described how they specifically engage the ideology of autonomous art in addition to upending many of its practices. Helpful in that task are critics and theorists (often feminist) who have proposed an aesthetic linked to women's domestic practice and explicitly aligned against the "dominative vision" of the market, including one who even conflates "decoration" with "domesticity" in his definition of the process of living in relation to the physical and (not just) visual environment of the home.

Both Hilde Hein and Josephine Donovan have argued that feminist aesthetics can and do arise out of the daily practice of domesticity, very much as I've argued from what I saw and heard in Atlanta. They propose that the key difference in such aesthetics is that they are "nondominative" — their expression and inscription of identity does not require the alienation of the self from the material environment via vision or reification, much less its displacement onto commodities. Instead, to the category of "works of art" are added those objects of everyday use that are lavished with additional attention and made beautiful

by both decorative elaboration *and* the investment in them of the memories of their use in the social context of family and friendship. Donovan states:

[O]ne may propose an aesthetic of everyday use modeled on the nondominative process art of women's domestic aesthetic praxis, their use-value production. . . . Such art remains embedded in the everyday. It is not extracted and commodified as a "masterpiece," distinct from the everyday world. Because of this, the everyday world remains illumined by its beauty. Beauty and its ontological intensity – its sacrality – are not withdrawn, leaving the mundane workaday world all the more profane and providing aesthetic illumination only for an elite. Rather it remains a part of the worker's world, providing sacred, utopian space within that world and thereby commenting dialectically upon – offering a negative critique of – the profane reified world of commodity capitalism from the domestic standpoint.<sup>4</sup>

In some ways, Donovan's argument seems to hearken back to more sociological (or anthropological) ideas about the role and definition of "art" and "aesthetic," including John Dewey's pragmatic view as refined by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton: aesthetic experience is defined by heightened awareness of the self through interaction with a material object in a rich social context – here, the domestic one. More specifically, Donovan's theory also connects with Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's distinction between the typical masculine goals of aesthetic experience (differentiation) and the typical feminine goals of aesthetic experience (integration). But it is important to note that she, Hein, and other feminists working in this vein are not merely trying to rehabilitate craft or other materials or genres historically associated

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<sup>4</sup> Donovan, pp. 53-54.



with women into the exclusive canons of fine art by appealing to their power to produce aesthetic experiences; nor are they intending to follow any of the various versions of the idea that “art” is whatever a group of people concerned with art say it is, believe it is, or theorize it is, all of which contribute in one way or another to the attribution of meaning to the abstracted play of intra-field self-reference, synonymous with the mechanisms of consumer capitalism.<sup>5</sup> In fact, though they allow for the possibility that women might produce “autotelic” (i.e., self-referencing as “art”) objects in these domestic environments, such works are immediately suspect because their critique of reification is blunted (if not nullified) by their very autotelic nature, by the way such works evoke and give legitimacy to the “disinterested perspective” of the market.<sup>6</sup> Thus, even though these authors take us close to an aesthetic that fits the practice of domesticity I’ve described, by redefining “authentic (women’s) art” they engage in their own act of ideological boundary-marking, re-segregating domesticity and art as the latter is commonly conceived.

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<sup>5</sup> I am conceiving of this group quite broadly, to include the arguments of Howard Becker, George Dickie’s “institutional theory of art,” and Arthur Danto’s idea’s as expressed in his *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1981), and elsewhere. Aesthetic theory, in particular, says Hein, “thrives on the inconstancy and inconsistency of its domain, that being defined in accordance with a “discourse of reasons,” itself a matter of controversy. The “artworld” is unstable by choice, the more so since its existence is contingent upon an ever-changing pool of private sensibilities.” (Hein, p. 8).

<sup>6</sup> Donovan, p. 63: “[A]rt is inherently political in that it by definition offers a negative critique of commodity exchange reification. This, of course, is true of autotelic art as well as of the artisanal craft of women’s domestic practice. However, the former retains the dominative character – and therefore is complicit in the very oppressions it may seek to criticize – while the latter does not.”

A different approach is taken by Kevin Melchionne, who, contrary to the idea that domesticity produces artworks from the raw material of things used in its practices, has suggested that the very practice of domesticity – the arrangement of both space and its objects for comfort, convenience, and beauty, for which he reclaims the term “decoration” – can, itself, be a work of “environmental art” that connects “the design of space” and “the actual process of inhabiting and maintaining of space.”<sup>7</sup> In parallel with Donovan’s distinction between use-value objects and autotelic ones, Melchionne emphasizes that objects within this scheme cannot claim priority over the whole, cannot assert preeminence over the living of life in the space, nor even draw too much attention to themselves:

[T]he aesthetic of the interior lies not merely in the visual appearance of rooms and their contents, but in how we experience being the content of rooms or, in other words, how we experience interior space as environment. This experience is determined less by our attention to objects that we might encounter in the room than our unfocused sense of the room as an unacknowledged background or setting for the occasion that brings us into the room.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin Melchionne, “*Living in Glass Houses.*” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:2 Spring 1998:p. 200.

<sup>8</sup> Melchionne, p. 199. As the passage continues, Melchionne provides another link between the dynamics of the retail commodity marketplace and the kind of viewing position/attitude required by avant-garde art of its viewers: “It is sometimes impossible to distinguish the thrill of entering a space from the thrill of the objects or persons we encounter there, a fact that has been thoroughly exploited by retailers. As Francis Sparshott argues in his now classic essay on the subject, environmental features function as texture, adornment, or modification of a setting rather than as an “icon” asserting itself upon us: “A feature, however conspicuous, contributes to an environment when it serves as accent or foil. Its aesthetic value ceases to be environmental only in so far as it functions as an autonomous object out to monopolize attention.”

Whether the sofa matches the artworks or the artworks match the sofa, both are subordinated to the lived identity of the inhabitants, those who, “through habituation, integrate labor and pleasure” and prevent “interior decoration [from] float[ing] above daily life as a pure visual spectacle.”<sup>9</sup>

This formulation of the relationship between domesticity and art also seems to come close to that being lived-out in Atlanta, precisely in its emphasis on the integration of artworks into the entire aesthetic scheme of the home. But again, in trying to re-cast the term “art” with respect to the bourgeois home, Melchionne misses some of the contingent and uneven character of the experience of artworks in the homes I studied. In practice, domesticity as a work of “environmental art” is in a constant give-and-take relationship with the demands of *gently* iconic artworks, which remain willing, so to speak, to submit themselves to the environment in their turn because their makers implicitly understand the environmental aesthetic and the place of artworks within it. The home does not cease to be environmental art when attention focuses on domestic paintings because domestic paintings are essentially integrative and co-operative with the environmental goals of the bourgeois interior, while still performing (and getting special attention for) their role as special markers of identity.

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<sup>9</sup> Melchionne, p.194.

So what do we make of domestic painting then, in relation to design, decoration, and domesticity? Whatever other distinctive features it has, domestic painting represents its participants' collective effort to balance belief in the sacrality of the artwork, particularly as "the work of a single hand and mind" whom they do recognize as having a special gift and special role in culture, with the practice of decoration/domesticity as elaborated by Hein and Donovan and Melchionne. Here is all the use-value, the construction of symbolic space and the creation of an environment in which what Melchionne calls "gracious living" can occur and which it actually intends to encourage. But it also recognizes in artworks the benefits – the efficiencies – of aspects of market culture's deployment of visual signs and systems of organization. Images have become the prime means by which space is rendered and commodified under advanced capitalism because they are very efficient tools for such inherently ideological work. In recognizing the role that the physical body plays in the experience of space, we must also recognize (as domestic painting does) that the eye is arguably our most important sensory organ, and, to paraphrase Cicero, sight the most direct means by which the abstract concept may be retained, marked, in our minds.

Perhaps it is the distinctive feature of domestic painting, then, to recover the artwork, as such, with many of its historical connotations intact, for the purpose of "decoration" as understood by Melchionne, or "domestic praxis" as

described by Donovan, but, in every case, as integrated into the symbolic, emotional and relational landscape of the private home. Here art retains its aura, and the artist her place as a gifted individual who can see differently (or more clearly) what is around her; but the idea that art is to be produced for an audience of the artist's professional peers is transformed by the understanding that these artists are (and often, by practical necessity must be) professionally *bourgeois women* as well as artists, integrated in a common culture with others like them.<sup>10</sup> Thus the group of their peers – those with the qualifications to judge art on the terms internal to the culture of its production – is radically expanded from only those who paint and those who sell paintings to include all who understand that small paintings can and should play a significant role in the decorated house by fixing in the mind as well as in physical space instances of domestic praxis, of bourgeois identity and being, and “momentarily capturing or highlighting or simply attending to those moments.”<sup>11</sup> As Pollock argued, even the tools and practices of the market, of masculine ideology of the artist may be adopted and used by women, but to *different purposes*.

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<sup>10</sup> That is, they not only are professionalized in the degree to which they take seriously the fulfillment of the various roles that make up bourgeois womanhood (wife, mother, friend, as well as artist/business woman), but also do not shy away from professing their identity as ‘bourgeois.’

<sup>11</sup> Donovan, p. 64 (see epigraph, above).

### *What is Bourgeois Art?*

Finally, what remains for this dissertation is to answer whether or not domestic painting is bourgeois art, and perhaps *how* it might be bourgeois art. For if it *is* such an example, it will tell us at least as much about the character of bourgeois culture in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America as it does about art. Just as an examination of the domestic painting market in Atlanta led me to a critical assessment of the use of “decorative” as a rather misleading epithet of aesthetic disdain, it also led me to re-consider what constitutes the essential nature of being bourgeois, as well, and even provided clues for reassessment of the definitions already available, if not a new answer.

The first definition of something like bourgeois art encountered within the scope of this dissertation was that proposed in and by the provincial avant-garde culture in St. Louis, and reported by Plattner. But to be honest, given his focus on avant-garde ideology, he defined it more as what avant-garde art was *not*, than by what “bourgeois art” actually was. This means that a possibly-unintended distinction was made between two different kinds of not-avant-garde art, the first being work that was considered trite, shallow, decorative, produced by bourgeois women, and above all, lacking the avant-garde’s sense of “painting for history” and “advancing culture.” These last two qualities were shared by decorative art and that art that was the more likely candidate for

Plattner's finding of "bourgeois." Since the central dilemma facing artists who wished to be considered avant-garde was how to avoid the implication that either they or their creative work made concessions to the market economy, the prime feature tacitly ascribed to bourgeois art was that it *did* make concessions to, or even court inclusion in, the bubbling cauldron of consumer commodities. For all its shortcomings—namely a thorough misunderstanding of decoration as a practice—this anti-definition does at least accurately recognize a connection between art and the domestic scene (and the women whose space the bourgeois home remains), and to how paintings in the domestic scene provide reassuring experiences of domesticity itself. But it is also important that the definition of "bourgeois" mixes the subjects of historical teleology (assumed to be the sole province of the avant-garde) and market forces (assumed to be indicative of "bourgeois art") into one stew of ideological oppositions. While the purpose may have been to clearly distinguish between avant-garde and bourgeois art, the convoluted logic required to produce a stark distinction ultimately proves to be a helpful link to the more theoretically-rigorous second set of definitions provided by Bourdieu.

Much of Bourdieu's work on the nature and dynamics of the field of cultural production is directed towards de-mystifying the "complementary" relationships of cultural and economic power shared by the fields in which each is given full sway; a key point is that the field of restricted production—avant-

garde art—only retains its claims to cultural authority “by virtue of a constant, collective repression of narrowly ‘economic’ interest and of the real nature of the practices revealed by ‘economic’ analysis.”<sup>12</sup> To simplify in the extreme, producers of avant-garde art (including the whole range of “auxiliary personnel” who are hardly dispensable) cannot escape their identity as part of the dominant class in advanced capitalist society by appeal to the fact that they are the “dominated fraction,” because their dominated economic status is what they collectively trade for cultural power that is ultimately directed towards the legitimization and reproduction of extant power relations, expressed through both symbolic and concrete techniques of the marketplace. In other words, bourgeois art and avant-garde art belong to the same dominant economic class and culture, despite the myriad positions and contra-positions available within it.

Similarly, Bourdieu’s account of the historical teleology and (dis)continuity in avant-garde art similarly sites both it and bourgeois art within a common field:

On the right, reproductive art constructed in accordance with the generative schemes of ‘straight’, ‘straightforward’ representation of reality, and social reality in particular, i.e. orthodoxy . . . This orthodox art would be timeless if it were not continuously pushed into the past by the movement brought into the field of production by the dominated factions’ insistence on using the powers they are granted to change the worldview

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<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu (1993), P. 74.



and overturn the temporal and *temporary* hierarchies to which 'bourgeois' taste clings.<sup>13</sup>

It is not just avant-garde art that is historically motivated (or, moving through history); in this scheme, bourgeois art, too, is in motion, only towards the past rather than the future, and motivated by the action of the avant-garde rather than under its own (cultural) power. So in terms of class aesthetics, time—quantified and given direction by intellectual agency—is one of the things held out to set avant-garde art apart from hopelessly retrograde bourgeois art. But on the other hand, the assignment of works to the class of art termed “bourgeois” is not as simple as identifying the current use of past or passé styles (like the persistent impressionism and post-impressionism seen in domestic painting), for as tempting and often accurate as such an *ad hoc* marker of bourgeoisness may be, Bourdieu also notes that the constant renovation and “forward” march of avant-garde culture often depends on “returns” to past styles, which are rescued from bourgeois taste (and institutionalization) only by virtue of the intellectual efforts of avant-garde theorists, whether the artists themselves or critics aligned with them in the market. Indeed, such returns could be claimed by the bourgeoisie itself and completely rehabilitated for its own uses, were it not for the intellectual structure of avant-garde theory maintaining the “meaning” of

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<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, p. 102.

such returns in the constant play of references of which only the theorists understand.<sup>14</sup>

Bourdieu's expansive depiction of avant-garde art, then, has its identity resting largely in the intellectual work of being an artist, that role nearly defined by the manipulation of signs that represent positions within the field of positions – a dynamic eerily similar to the play of signs that occurs in the market practices employed to create and enhance false difference and distinction between (and the desirability of) commodities in advanced capitalism. Adding the fact that avant-gardism has its historical roots in some of the same soil that gave the rise to bourgeois consumer culture in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century to those connections already mentioned (disguised economics and contingent histories of styles), it is not such a great leap to suggest that all avant-garde art is finally bourgeois art, Bourdieu's very careful description of the different formations of taste that exist within the field of cultural production notwithstanding. In his essay, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," T. J. Clark set about to analyze precisely such a time when exactly this "dirty little secret" of art became inescapable, and the bourgeois gave up pretending it had relegated the field of

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<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, pp. 60-1 and 108-9 "In fact, these are always *apparent* returns, since they are separated from what they rediscover by the negative reference to something which was itself the negation (of the negation of the negation, etc.) of what they rediscover (when, that is, the intention is not simply pastiche, a parody which presupposes all the intervening history)... .In and through games of distinction, these winks and nudges, silent, hidden references to other artists, past or present, confirm a complicity which excludes the layperson, who is always bound to miss what is essential, namely the interrelations and interactions of which the work is only the silent trace (p. 109).

culture to its alter-ego, the intellectual avant-garde, even for the moment; his goal was to discover “to what extent does Abstract Expressionism really belong[s], at the deepest level – the level of language, of procedure, of presuppositions about worldmaking – to the bourgeoisie who paid for it and took it on their travels.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Clark’s conclusion was that,

[after a] withdrawal from Abstract Expressionism's impossible class-belonging – its horrible honesty about art and its place. . . the project of "returning art mainly to normal avant-garde channels" was and remains a hopeless one in America. The grounds (always shaky) for an enduring avant-garde autonomy, or even the myth of one, simply do not exist.<sup>16</sup>

My point here is not to demonstrate the futility of describing a bourgeois art in order to complement Clark’s despair about the impossibility of a continuing avant-garde in America, but rather to point out how and why these various verbal constructions of “bourgeois art” miss the point of looking at domestic painting as a candidate for that title; that task is facilitated by noting again the relationship of decoration and design to the modes of visual representation that dominate American culture, as seen in Clark’s account of the apparent correlation between art experienced in the home and the class identity of its owner:

Seen in its normal surroundings, past the unobtrusive sofas and the calla lilies, as part of that unique blend of opulence and sparseness which is the taste of the picture-buying classes in America, a good Hofmann seems

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<sup>15</sup> T. J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” in Krauss, Rosalind E., et al., editors, *October: the Second Decade, 1986-1996* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997): p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75, footnote 18.

always to be blurting out a dirty secret that the rest of the decor is conspiring to keep. . . For what it shows is the world its users inhabit in their heart of hearts. It is a picture of their "interiors," of the visceral-cum-spiritual upholstery of the rich.<sup>17</sup>

Even in Clark's description of the scene (reproduced and reinforced in the original piece by a photograph of the room), the distant, disinterested view to the painting (note, "*past* the unobtrusive sofas and the calla lilies") should be familiar to the reader as the gaze of the marketplace, which renders "interiors" wholly exterior for the sake of marketing the self as much as for the sake of marketing consumer goods, or ideologies. To Clark, this scene (along with the artists' own "lyric" excesses<sup>18</sup>) epitomizes the confluence of bourgeois economic power and its domestication of the avant-garde impulse, and for that matter, all of art.

The point I have been leading up to, then, is that, despite the probability that the scene described above accurately portrays the visual habits and aspirations of the "picture buying classes," that class does not exhaust bourgeois identity, and Clarke and others make the mistake of thinking bourgeois self-consciousness is entirely (or most essentially) bound up in what he calls the "lyric," represented in and through what Lefebvre calls "abstract space": the geometric, rationalized container for advanced capitalism, manipulated by

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<sup>17</sup> Clark (1997), p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Clark says, "By 'lyric' I mean the illusion in an artwork of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own. I mean those metaphors of agency, mastery, and self-centeredness that enforce our acceptance of the work as the expression of a single subject. This impulse is ineradicable, alas, however hard one strand of modernism may have worked, time after time, to undo or make fun of it. Lyric cannot be expunged by modernism, only repressed" (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

architects, designers, and some artists. Rather, the confluence in the scene of disinterested intellect (critical discourse), distanced abstract gaze (design), advanced capitalism (the upholstery of the rich), and a heroic, independent self (the lyric) tied up with dominant maleness enshrined in the artistic personae and “vision” of Abstract Expressionist painters represents – at most – half the picture of bourgeois identity, precisely because it is predicated on a perspective coded for “masculinity,” in opposition to a specifically bourgeois “femininity.” Here, Bourdieu’s ultimately historically-oriented analysis of the category of bourgeois art, Plattner’s “painting for history,” Clark’s need to relegate Abstract Expressionism to history so we (and art) can “go on,”<sup>19</sup> all stand in stark contrast to Donovan’s “moments of being,” which are rooted in practice rather than in teleological time, and so are not moments of *history* at all, though located in it. Instead of historical narrative, the central organizing principle of this “other bourgeois art” is social space: the relational, representational space of bourgeois domesticity, which Lefebvre describes as,

Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements. . . alive [with] an affective kernel or center: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations [and] may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Clark (1997), p. 35. “Not being able to make a previous moment of high achievement part of the past – not to lose it and mourn it and if necessary revile it – is, for art under the circumstances of modernism, more or less synonymous with not being able to make art at all.”

<sup>20</sup> Lefebvre, p. 41.

### *The Bourgeois Interior*

My aim in describing domestic paintings has not been to claim lofty or transformational effect for these paintings on the societal scale; and neither do the artists or others involved with them claim that widespread cultural impact is the point of these artworks. Rather, I have tried to demonstrate that a significant part of their meaning comes from the social setting of the private homes in which they are made and perceived. Art in this context is not less “authentic” than art made elsewhere, and it is also neither mass-produced nor naively created as a kind of folk-art. Instead, it is conceived of as symbolic communication, whether displayed in the intimate spaces of one’s own home or given as a marker of friendship. The individuality attributed to artists (even when they are individuals within a common social framework with the buyer) accounts for some of the power of the artwork, although even more important is the fact that the object itself is a trace of personal and intentional action. This last quality is what makes the objects particularly suited to being used as holders for new layers of individual meaning and experience, since they are already “primed” to record sociability and agency. Moreover, in the concrete setting of the bourgeois interior, works of art are often integrated through visual reference to the physical surroundings in which they hang, reinforcing their instrumental role as hinge-

points for the inhabitants' experience of the house itself as a repository for memory and identity. In this way, domestic paintings can reverse (but hardly change the meaning of) Bachelard's testimony that "the housewife awakens furniture that was asleep."

To that particularly evocative end, the marketplaces for domestic painting in Atlanta retain the characteristic connection of art and the home whether in the form of home shows or retail shops where paintings are a prerequisite for a complete and noteworthy "look of home." But the transformation of intuitive vision that occurs when it is moved into the public realm of the market is one of increasing visualization and spectacularization, with a diminishing sense of either emotional or bodily, phenomenological experience of the home. The more explicitly and dominantly visual is the way paintings are experienced, the more the integration of art and the rich interpersonal aesthetics of domesticity break down, leaving artworks to be submerged into the flood of other visual commodities. This tension between commerce and identity marks domestic painting, then, as a bourgeois art, correlated with the experience of bourgeois femininity today every bit as much as Abstract Expressionism was correlated with the form of bourgeois masculinity in the 1940s and 1950s; it serves to reinforce and reproduce those aspects of bourgeois culture now associated with the domestic sphere as (still) the woman's particular province. Yet understanding it as something other than a contributor to class or gender

oppression depends on a concept of “bourgeois” that does not reduce it to a strictly economic or sociological formation, much less define its sub-fractions by whether they sit in “first class,” “business,” or “coach” seats on trans-Atlantic airline flights.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the essential character of “the bourgeois spirit” is the concept of the bourgeois interior itself, understood as the “internalization of the human condition” that accompanied “the emergence of domesticity, privacy, comfort, the concept of the home and of the family.”<sup>22</sup>

Domestic painting as an aesthetic shows no preoccupation with what’s next or even with who’s been relegated to the “past” of art. Instead, it is a social practice that truly embraces the interiority of the bourgeois way of thinking about the world and one’s place within it (what John Lukacs called “this deepening human recognition that the sense of reality exists within [and that] enlightenment is of an interior, not an exterior, nature”<sup>23</sup>), and that seems to come readily to the half of bourgeois culture likely to be described by the term “feminine.” It is rooted firmly in the present, in the experience of living and nurturing relationships within households and between them. By habitually

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<sup>21</sup> Clark, p. 63, footnote 10: “A bourgeois, for me, is someone possessing the wherewithal to intervene in at least some of the important economic decisions shaping his or her own life (and those of others). A bourgeois, for me, is someone expecting (reasonably) to pass on that power to the kids. A petty bourgeois is someone who has no such leverage or security, and certainly no such dynastic expectations, but who nonetheless identifies wholeheartedly with those who do. . . . Sometimes symbols and lifestyles still have class inscribed on them in letters ten feet tall. What could be more disarmingly bourgeois, in the old sense, than the first-class section on an airplane crossing the Atlantic? And what more dismally petty bourgeois than coach?”

<sup>22</sup> John Lukacs, “The Bourgeois Interior,” *The American Scholar* 39:2 (Spring 1970): 623.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 630.



applying aesthetic effort to the process of domesticity, by uniting work and pleasure under the banner of an efficient kind of beauty, yet still not in isolation, ignorance, or disdain of the history of art and the artist under modernism, the women who make and exchange works in the domestic painting market represent an authentic bourgeois art as it is integrated into the patterns of living in the bourgeois home on an ongoing basis, in the here and now. To re-appropriate Michael Fried's phrase, in domestic painting as in bourgeois domesticity, "presentness is grace."

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## VITA

### Mark E. E. Sprinkle

Mark E. E. Sprinkle was born September 15, 1967 in College Station, Texas. He graduated from Denton High School in Denton, Texas in May 1986 and entered Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. in the fall of the same year. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1989, and in May 1990 graduated from Georgetown *magna cum laude* with majors in American Studies and Painting.

In 1991, while working as a decorative painter and cabinet-maker in Washington, D. C., Mark accepted a fellowship to pursue degrees in the M.A./PhD. Program in American Studies at the College of William and Mary. He married his wife, Beth, in January 1992, received his M.A. in 1993, and served as Assistant to the Curator of American Arts at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond until passing his comprehensive exams for the PhD. in the fall of 1994, after which he turned to fieldwork for his dissertation. At that time he also returned to his work as an artist, doing wall finishes and exhibiting and selling his painting and the frames he makes with his wife. Mark lives and works as an artist in Richmond, Virginia with Beth and three boys – Callaway (7 ½ years), McKinley (4 ¾ years) and Calder (1¾ years).