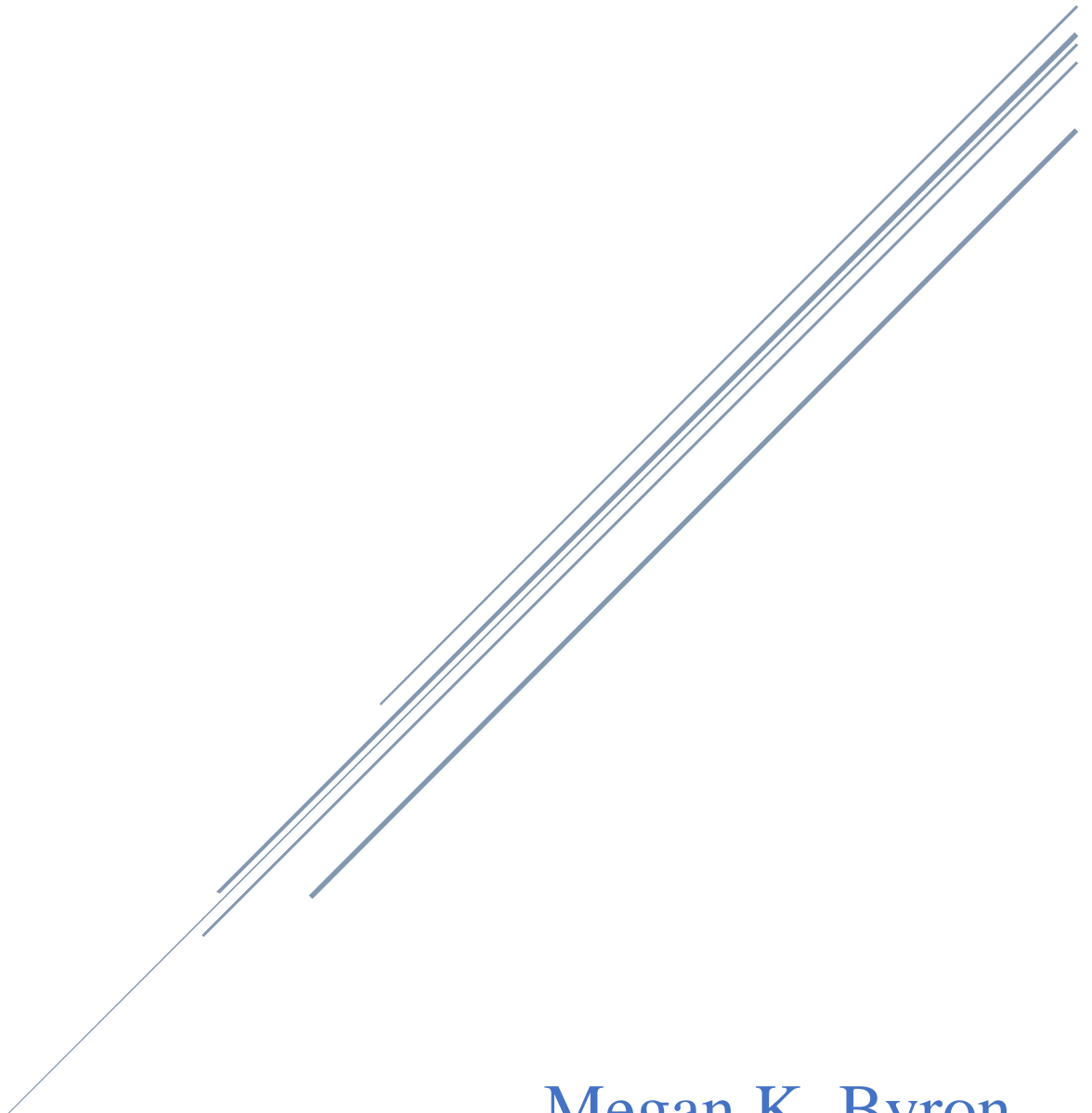


THE SPACE BETWEEN

The Capitalist Divinity of Art as Explored Through the Work
of Barbara Ségal



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Introduction

In the Fall of 2020, I began my final year of grad school at SUNY Purchase in Westchester, New York. As a curatorial studies student, my thesis consisted of a written portion and an exhibition, the latter being a group effort with my fellow grad students. The COVID-19 pandemic ripping through the world influenced this final project and its completion, forcing our little exhibition to live online as well as in a gallery space in the Neuberger Museum of Art that few could enter by CDC guidelines. Preparation for the exhibition occurred entirely in the virtual world affecting deadlines, personality conflicts, decisions about the space, and the exhibition thesis. On top of that, a core feature of the project had us choose only *one* object from the Neuberger's permanent collection to build an exhibition around. Talk about stressful.

We were to be the first group in the program's history to complete this student exhibition as the group before us had theirs cancelled due to the pandemic. They unfortunately never had the opportunity to fully realize their work, and ours was to be done without having even seen the object in person. I did get to see the object about five months later, after it was installed. Unprecedented times, indeed. Our collectively chosen object, with the guidance of the Neuberger's education curator, Kristen Lindberg, would shape our respective theses as well as the experience of our final year. We chose a curious object by the end of the first month.

The small, dense, and silently powerful *Dash* (1994) created by Barbara Ségal became our show's star. Inspired by the laundry theme and the weight of what we felt the work carried with it, we dubbed the show *Concentrated Power* (2021). Although one might not assume a polychrome, marble sculpture of a laundry detergent bottle—specifically a bottle of Dash—had star-quality. Ségal has a long career of mastery over sculpting the marble form. For years now, her dealings

with objects of the everyday, immortalized in stone, referred to personal relationships with personal items. I outline the conditions within which us grad student curators had to work to illustrate the confinement of our operations. These fixed margins informed not only the object we could exhibit, but, by default, our theses. Adaptability had to be our mantra going into this from the first week and adapt we did.

We each built our written theses around this unassuming object, taking strands from our personal interests and connecting them to this small, intimate sculpture. What I see in Ségál's works, *Dash* included, is a deification of commodities and personal objects through carving them out of marble. Even though her diverse marble works of commercial objects are hailed by those who see them, being works of high craftsmanship, they are not all treated equally as evidenced by the provenance of the works in question. While the *Cathedral Candy Series* of Birkins was once exhibited in the windows of luxury clothing brands and galleries across Manhattan pre-COVID, *Dash* had one item on its provenance: its exhibition at one 2000 show in the Neuberger before being donated to the institution by the artist and its subsequent display in our student exhibition. Regardless of it being carved in marble with the same mastery, *Dash* is not regarded in the same way as the stone Birkin Bags. Yet at the same time, Ségál recalled in a meeting she had with us curators that someone had once called her Birkin Bags “soulless” to her face.¹

It seemed to her the only reason they were labeled as such was due to their being reproductions of commodities. What interested me when I heard this was the implication that art had a soul to begin with, and that the aesthetic form it takes judges whether a work has one. According to those who can declare a work soulless, marble sculpture (theoretically) *has* a soul. Especially because of the labor enacted on the stone to shape it; the hand of the artist being cited

¹ Barbara Ségál (artist), in discussion with the author, Feb. 2021.

as the ensouling factor of a work by many art writers of the past, specifically, Walter Benjamin. But this critic of Ségol seemed to forgo this “truth” for a narrative that removed capitalism from art, an increasingly popular narrative in the contemporary art world, albeit a false one. Art has a long and detailed history with supply and demand. What interested me was the notion that attaching a sort of divinity to art not only makes it impervious to capitalism, but makes capitalism a sacrilegious smear upon the sacred face of art.

I find the impulse to remove art from capitalism to be a strange one. I see the phrase *art became capitalistic* repeatedly as if art were not already. Asserting that art is too good, too pure to be a commodity when Christie’s and Sotheby’s have existed as staples of the art community since the eighteenth century. Art has historically always been a commodity, and it certainly is now. Why is this a taboo notion today? Why is a marble sculpture soulless if it is a sculpture of a product? And what is this imposed-upon divinity that makes art exist at a higher plane, and by proxy, the artists, too? I attempt to explore these questions that have plagued my time at Purchase through the work of the woman whose unlikely bottle of laundry detergent became the central focus of a one-piece exhibition.

The Space Between

The Capitalist Divinity of Art as Explored Through the Work of
Barbara Ségal

Can the distance between a person and an artwork be measured? The experience of art has long been cited as something akin to a spiritual one. Standing before a work of art within the temple of the museum, the hand or eye of the artist captures an immaterial seed of the sacred. This emotional participation fosters a distance between the sacred object and the person that, I argue, *can* be measured. This essay will explore via comparison how the marble laundry detergent bottle *Dash* (1994) and the marble Birkin Bags of the *Cathedral Candy Series* (2019) by contemporary American artist Barbara Ségal measures that distance. While all the works in question are carved by the masterful hand of Ségal in lush marble, recalling the legacy of classical sculpture in the Western world, they are regarded differently by their audiences. The distance between viewer and *Dash* and the distance between viewer and the famous stone Birkin Bags are what endow them with the type of experience each one can, or cannot, transmit to a viewer. This distance between the work of art and the person viewing it is one of aesthetic divinity and is doubly amplified in Ségal's work when a high or low commodity is deified in marble.

Ségal's stone works exemplify what she calls her "compulsion for beauty."² The essence of this compulsion stems from her early studies where she learned stone carving in the French and Italian traditions. Already, there is a clear religious foundation tied up with the artist's quest for learning this craft based on the art historical locations of her study. The Italian Renaissance famously produced both paintings and sculptures that are household names in contemporary American culture. Beauty is divine, and the divine is beautiful in Ségal's world and to manifest that on this plane is to accomplish that artistic compulsion. One of Ségal's first stone sculptures, *Duomo* (1986), is a colorful, striped polo shirt haphazardly thrown on its hanger. "Duomo" is the Italian word for cathedral, hinting that this sculpture representing an object of the everyday acts as

² Ibid.

a mediator to the divine in much the same way as a house of worship. Even more telling was Ségal's choice of object to mimic in place of an Italian cathedral. A shirt that, representative of its time in its colors and design, does not immediately come across as beautiful subject matter in the same way The Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, or "The Duomo," might.

Ségal bestowing some sort of divinity on everyday objects by recreating them in marble is a marker of her whole artistic career. A seemingly universal concept in the art world abides by the unspoken rule that all art—so long as it is called art—transcends the everyday and becomes an arbiter of something special. That something special might be what is popularly known as the aura. "Aura" is the given name of this distance, first attributed by Walter Benjamin in his landmark text "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."³ Since that 1935 essay, "aura" has not lost its popular usage in describing an unseen halo of energy surrounding a work of art, the religious connotations of a secular practice. However, not all art is seen as equal in the eyes of the beholder. From that January day in 1839 when news of the first photograph spread, all the way to the present contemporary era, certain styles, methods, and subject matter came under question as truly being "art." When the photograph emerged as an art, painters striving to mimic the natural world drew hard boundaries against it as a valid artistic method. Alternately, when Jackson Pollock made his first drip paintings, he could never have known the common dismissal of his work more than seventy years later as underserving of its status. So, what constitutes a work of art having an aura, or being ensouled?

The parameters of divinity have become ever more nebulous. The hand of the artist used to be the prerequisite until photography came on the scene. Even then, photomanipulation (internal or external) is often used for its ability to heighten a photograph past its banal replication of reality

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 1935

to sit among the gods of art. Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster Series* (1962-3) comes to mind as an example of this. In it, Warhol—with the aid of his assistants—manipulates crime scene photographs with smudges and smears across the images. He collages the same image multiple times with different imperfections, making each picture unique. By entering the space of the photographs and manipulating their faces, Warhol and his assistants turn reproduction on its head by inserting a mechanical “hand” of the artist. Despite the cold removal of Warhol's work, he paradoxically ensouls the photographs with an aura. Benjamin was suspicious of the ability to replicate art and images as he believed it diminishes the aura, closing the distance between art and person, making way for manipulation via physical intervention, music, or voices to manipulate the person.⁴ Art historian Thomas Crow argued that Warhol's interventions pointed to a social critique of the apathy American society he felt accrued due to this very manipulation and repetition through gruesome images.⁵ These sentiments align with Benjamin's anxieties of the closing distance. Therefore, for art to exist as art, it must have that distance in place, it must have an aura.

For Benjamin, aura is both a bridge of connection between art and person as well as a bridge marking distance. Ségal's hand is undoubtedly present in her marble sculptures, thus, by the logic of “aura,” her works contain them. Within the *Cathedral Candy Series*, popularly known as her stone Birkin Bags, the sense of divinity is reinforced by what she has to say about her own work. From her website, “In the *Cathedral Candy Series*, my sculptures reinforce the bags' iconic status. Presenting an object that is by nature ephemeral, and then transforming it into an enduring,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thomas Crow, “From the Archives: Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol,” *Art in America*, 1987, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/archives-saturday-disasters-trace-reference-early-warhol-63578/>

almost religious, idol for worship.”⁶ Ségal knows intimately the power of the commodity exerting a divine influence upon the person in much the same way that a marble sculpture does. Benjamin’s focus concentrated on the closing distance being the linchpin of manipulating the viewer but failed to recognize how a wide distance functioned in much the same way—the aura being that factor of manipulation in commodity fetishism. For example, the Birkin Bag, Hermès’ famous luxury product, is a status symbol for billionaire socialites worldwide, slowly trickling down to celebrities. It is reportedly even a better investment than gold. Adding to its distance, Hermès refuses to sell the bag to anyone they deem undeserving of one, creating an aura with its exclusivity.

To liken the bags to that of an idol is an understatement. There is no question about whether they “deserve” to be immortalized in marble when global worship is one of the seemingly inherent characteristics of the product. Unlike *Dash*, the *Cathedral Candy Series* is not scaled to life-size, but even larger than the largest real-life bags. *Porta del Paradiso* (2019)—literally “Gate of Heaven”—a black and white striped bag with classical columns and archways carved along the top, measures twenty-four inches in height. In her compulsion for beauty, Ségal captures the essence of how Birkin Bags steal the imagination and place it squarely within a class-induced fantasy of owning luxury goods. She makes the aura of the bag a part of the aura of her bag sculptures, doubling down on the distancing factor by way of the seemingly divine properties of both art and bag. Art critic John Berger in his renown television series *Ways of Seeing* (1973) teases out this ideal in episode three. He argues that the faculty of Western European oil painting—though this argument also extends to sculpture—is to celebrate property, advertising to onlookers

⁶ Barbara Ségal, “Cathedral Candy Series,” BarbaraSegal.com, accessed April 2021, <http://www.barbarasegal.com/#/cathedral-candy-series/>

a continuity of power and worthiness as seen in portraiture.⁷ This facet of his argument is exemplified by Singaporean socialite and entrepreneur, Jamie Chua, who has the largest collection of Birkin Bags with over 200 bags.

Footage of Chua interacting with her collection reinforces Berger's ideas on art collecting. In a Business Insider episode of *So Expensive*, Chua slowly wanders around her glass-encased collection, carefully opens the case, and selects one of the rarest Birkin Bags to show off to dozens of cameras waiting with anticipation for the moment of reveal. That rare bag is from the Hermès Himalaya Collection, the 35cm White Himalaya, dubbed the "Holy Grail" of handbags.⁸ The leather is made of albino crocodile skin and dyed to emulate the Himalayan Mountains. Fans of the Birkin Bag liken the product to a work of art due to the high skill of the artisans who craft them, their limited availability, and their expense. Berger notes how paintings and sculptures are different from other artforms like music and poetry. He claims that because of the tangibility of painting and sculpture, and its ability to physically surround the collector, art becomes a physical representation of that person's ability to own property. When footage of Chua surrounded by her bags is posted on her social media, she is exercising her very real financial power that is validated by the visible ability to purchase over 200 of one of the world's most coveted products. Where does aura fit in here? Firstly, the bags themselves are handcrafted, thus the hand of the artist (or artisan) is present. Secondly, their rarity and limited availability to a certain caliber of wealthy and famous person—Hermès chooses the recipients of the bags and being one of the chosen is part of

⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC Four, 1972

⁸ Business Insider, "Why Birkin Bags are So Expensive | So Expensive," YouTube video, 8:12, June 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67GVKHXqB48&t=121s>

the experience of owning the product—makes the distance physical.⁹ With that distance, aura persists.

It is this question of wealth and class inherent in the work of art that for Berger contributes to the auratic experience of art. Ségal’s marble bags take that to a literal level where the line between wealth, luxury goods, and art disappear completely. Importantly, her work does not *make* them all one in the same, her work exposes how they *are* all one in the same. At the crossroads between beauty and wealth lives the soul of art—the aura being the quiet force seducing the viewer into an emotional encounter with the tangible representation of secular divinity. When Ségal chooses the Birkin Bag as her muse, she boldly makes the connection between art and its place as a commodity, embracing how intertwined capitalism and art are. Much like how Chua surrounds herself with Birkin Bags as a status of wealth, visiting a museum or gallery is literally surrounding the viewer with a panorama of wealth intensified by art’s perceived divinity. However, to visit the temple of art is not to own the art itself, but to experience luxury in a way most people never will in their private homes. This temporary foray into a world with millions of dollars-worth of paintings and sculptures both shortens the distance and intensifies it all the same. The experience shortens it due to the physical presence of the non-wealthy viewer entering the space of art, and intensifies it because to physically enter the space, one must in many instances pay, and at the end of the day, one must leave. It is not theirs to own, and most likely, never will be.

This tension exposes the truth of capitalism in art and its institution. Art is part of the many luxury goods one can own and then donate for tax write-offs, providing the unintended function as a distancing factor between classes. This aspect helps inform art’s aura, create its distance, and

⁹ Note: while a buyer does not have to go through Hermes to buy a Birkin Bag—there are licensed retailers who sell the product that anyone with the money can purchase from—being chosen by Hermes is what makes *your* Birkin “special,” if you *are* chosen, that is.

crowns it with divinity marked through its unattainable nature. Yet, the aura is also hailed as the essential factor of raising art to a higher level of existence without identifying how or why art is sacred. It just “is.” According to the argument of art’s inherent divine nature, it cannot be tainted by the ugliness and mortality of capitalism as it exceeds the everyday. Despite Christie’s and Sotheby’s major role in the art world for almost three hundred years, today, they are the red-headed stepchild, their omission from art history curricula subtle yet glaring. Money and art history have always been, and continue to be, familiar bedfellows. Looking at history provides the evidence. Prior to the Renaissance, artists were mostly anonymous craftsmen commissioned to paint or sculpt with their labor and supplies funded by the commissioner of the work. For centuries, artist labor was akin to the labor of metalsmiths, carpenters, or tanners. This truth existed in the Middle Ages, the era of the Roman Empire, the Ancient Greek world, and far before that. Artmaking for money was not a taboo, but a skilled craft one utilized to make a living. Even then, it was wealthy patrons who had enough money to purchase the luxury of art to immortalize their family legacy, not the wider masses.¹⁰ Then came their immediate successors in the Renaissance who changed the Western experience of art forever.

First, it was Cimabue with his Madonna surrounded by angels. Then, it was Giotto with his New Testament scenes of Christ. By the time the 15th century came, the groundwork of non-anonymous artists who channeled the essence of Christendom in their work was laid before the next generation of soon-to-be immortalized artists. Thus, the Western world promptly entered the age of artists. No longer was it a commission of a Madonna, but of a Leonardo. Artists channeled the power of God through their hands, directly implanting it into canvas or stone. Art became something that could transmit this divinity to the patron via the hand of the artist. The Renaissance

¹⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC Four, 1972

marked the start of the era where artists no longer operated as craftspeople, but conductors of divinity validated by their ability to transfer physically the sacred into their materials, an era that the Western art world has yet to leave. In other words, the artist's skill, or hand, becomes what one paid for rather than the material used. Like Catholic priests calling upon the blessing of God to transform unleavened bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, aura becomes imbued into an artwork in a similar process. The artist, like the priest, is a special intercessor who acts as a mediator between God and His people, except the secular god is now art, while the people have remained much the same. The people themselves cannot perform the tasks of the priest without initiation, just as the people cannot be an "artist" of the art world without initiation. That being, the public validation of one's work appearing in a museum or gallery—where did this idea come from?

Using the legends of Cimabue and Giotto, artists of the 15th century lobbied for an elevated social status claiming their craft, compared to others, was superior *because* they had the ability to tap into something deeper as exemplified by their predecessors. Therefore, this inherent connection to God justified an increase in their pay and social standing. Recall that the Italian Renaissance operated under the Catholic Church, relating divinity to wealth and vice versa became a solid argument for this rise in class status.¹¹ Thus, artists removed themselves from the common craftsman and likened themselves with divinity through the vehicle of capitalism. This legacy of the divine artist directly informs the distance created between art and person. The art and artists of the Renaissance majorly influenced Ségal's developing practice when she was a young sculptor learning her craft in Italy. Her artwork inherited the Renaissance entwined ideals of wealth and holiness. Although the Renaissance has long since passed, this element of Christendom has yet to

¹¹ Jean Gimpel, *The Cult of Art: Against Art and Artists*, 2nd ed., Edinburg: Polygon Books, 1991

leave the status of the artist as far as the art world is concerned. One example comes through the fame of Jackson Pollock who is often referred to as “heroic” and a “genius.”¹² These descriptors of his person elevate the man and his work above that of a mere human, distancing him by way of the pedestal he continues to inhabit. Contributing to his legend is his mythologized death, the art world martyring his image as a result. The martyr, the highest of holies a human can achieve, begets a level of distance that surpasses humanity and enters sainthood.

When making the jump from artists to saints, it is important to keep some things in mind. In the Catholic tradition, saints are individuals who are chosen by God to have lived devout and holy lives. They are human spirits who can be prayed to for help in various mundanities as emissaries of God. Even more intriguing for this idea of artist as saint is the idea of relics. Saint relics are pieces of the body of the saint, or some object that was integral to the saint’s legend. Making a pilgrimage to see the relic, touch it, or even, in some instances, consume it, is reported to bestow certain properties to the interacting person. The same process occurs with art. Like St. John the Baptist’s head in the Church of San Silvestro in Rome, St. Thomas’ Finger at the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, or Christ’s Crown of Thorns at Notre Dame, artworks act as extensions of their artists where devotees can pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the museum and pay homage. These relics have a distance instilled within them by way of their divinity, albeit a secular divinity, not their monetary worth. They have spiritual worth instead, which is the currency through which holy body parts are valued. To this end, art is the relic of the artist. Whether seen, interacted with, or consumed, the distance remains if the viewer perceives there to be a distance at all. This devotion of the viewer is collected by the aesthetic and religious pleasure derived from the experience of inhabiting the same space as art.

¹² Holland Cotter, “Jackson Pollock at the Guggenheim: Works of Swirls and Pixie Dust,” New York Times, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/26/arts/design/26poll.html>

In an interview, Ségal accounts multiple instances of people falling to their knees and bowing down to her upon seeing her work—mainly, the Birkin Bags. This phenomenon is not unique to Ségal, however. Instances of intense emotional reactions are commonplace concerning modern and contemporary art. Rothko’s works, for example, are especially famous for their reported ability to emotionally overwhelm the viewer. The creation of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas is a testament to the commonality and ubiquity of these reactions. Why would anyone break down in front of an artwork, or prostrate to an artist? The culture of the Christian West may have something to do with it. That, and the history of the divine artist, the vestiges of the Renaissance infiltrating modern ways of seeing and experiencing art. A contemporary example of this is the legendary MoMA performance of Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* (2010). According to MoMA, over the course of nearly three months, for eight hours a day, she met the gaze of over one thousand people.¹³ Many participants were brought to tears. A Tumblr blog called “Marina Abramović Made Me Cry” has archived photographs of these reactions.¹⁴ Abramović claims that the surprising outcome of the performance came from the human desire to have contact. While there certainly is an argument to be made for the artist’s interpretation of her own work—a critique of the disconnection between people in the 21st century—I argue there is more to it than that.

If the artist, typically a removed subject and a legendary figure akin to a saint, places themselves among the viewers, the worshippers at the temple of art, it is no wonder the responses to Saint Marina were as such. Was there an element of human connection being met? Sure. But

¹³ MoMA, “The Artist is Present,” accessed April 2021, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/

¹⁴ MarinaAbromovicMadeMeCry (username), “Marina Abromović Made Me Cry,” 2010, accessed April 2021, <https://marinaabramovicmademecry.tumblr.com/>

what about a divine connection? Inexplicably crying in front of an artwork is one thing, but having the actual artist be present to *you* is something else. Which one would a follower of Christianity prefer: the Crown of Thorns, or Christ Himself? *The Artist is Present* breaks that distance while also maintaining it both physically and spiritually. In that work, Abramović and the person are seated in chairs, the distance between them separated by a table. Only one instance has her breaking that distance completely, and that is when her artistic collaborative partner and ex-husband, Ulay Laysiepen, is seated across from her. Ulay is not a member of the viewing public, a worshipper, but an artist himself whose presence in this piece reportedly moved people to tears. Otherwise, no other interaction between Abramović and the seated occurred. She is present, but at a distance. Like a statue of the Virgin Mary, she is there for veneration and to touch her would be to break that distance, contaminating the aura, for Abramović *is* the artwork in this piece. Only she has the power to reach out and break that distance, but when she does, it is with another artist. Like Giotto and Cimabue before her, being an artist is inherently holy, channeling God directly. *The Artist is Present* helps validate the narrative that art and artist are inherently divine, thereby validating the aura, the distance, and in turn, the capitalist nature of art.

As seen thus far, the element of capitalism has the power to inform the spiritual value of a work of art. The art is an extension of the artist who is canonized—the same word used to usher a figure into sainthood by the Catholic Church—by the legitimizing power of the museum or gallery that elevates them to a divine status. Which, in turn, values their artwork at a higher expense. This is further legitimized when the viewer sees the work occupying space within the temple architecture of the museum or gallery. However, devotion to art does not extend to all art. Though an artist may be canonized and their work, by extension, allowed within the hallowed halls of the museum or gallery, art is not regarded equally all around by nature of it being art. Ségal's body of

work stretches from the late eighties to the present. While she is no doubt masterful in all her work, the question arises: how come not all her work is regarded as the *Cathedral Candy Series*?

In American popular culture, what corresponds with beauty are wealth and luxury. This is evidenced, once again, by something like the Birkin Bag reaching as high a social platform as it has. Hermès' marketing strategy of making the bag exclusive only to a few has, of course, been a contributing factor; exploiting the desire to covet what one cannot have, thereby increasing the demand. Is a Birkin Bag so different from any other bag? The elements of its construction may relate some expense—the albino crocodile skin, for one—but what of its design? The Birkin Bag is an aesthetically pleasurable object; it is sleek, stylish, and seems to match any outfit regardless of pattern or color. Its image of luxury, contributing to its aesthetic pleasure, makes it a beautiful object and, therefore, a good object. This, versus something like a bargain-brand laundry detergent does not stand up against the image of a luxury product. This feels obvious when talking about products, but what about art depicting products? Does *Dash* stand up to the bags of the *Cathedral Candy Series*?

Dash (1994) takes the form of a seemingly unassuming bottle of laundry detergent. But a closer look reveals the natural veins of the stone, revealing itself as a work of masterful carving. About one foot in height, the sculpture depicts a life-size marble replica of a Dash brand laundry detergent bottle. This human scale almost invites the viewer to simply reach out, grab it, and pour its contents into a washing machine (if it had contents, that is). That closing distance intensifies with it being modelled after an actual bottle of Dash laundry detergent. An orange body, a green cap, and black-lined white lettering comprise this work's immediate presentation. Ségal used the technique of inlay to recreate the bottle's label using Verona marble, rouge royal marble, Belgium black marble, and onyx. Created with the same intention and love as the bags, what is it about a

bottle of Dash that makes it worthy of being carved out of marble? Looking at Ségal's work from the 1990's, sculpting Objects of the Everyday was her calling card. As mentioned before, she gave a divine quality to banal things, but up until this moment, those objects were mostly clothes. To then honor the cleaning agent of clothing, pointing to that special relationship—or obsession—between people and purity, brings the viewer and their everyday experience closer to a marble artwork than ever before.

Dash, the laundry detergent, was advertised throughout the 1950's, 60's, and 70's as an affordable yet powerful alternative to more expensive brands. Its marketing targeted middle-class, white, nuclear families where the wife performed the labor of laundry. Immediately, we see that Dash lacks any component of luxury not only for its low price, but for targeting a woman who does her own labor and the labor of others. This is not a woman who could purchase a Birkin bag if they existed in that time. Once again, capitalism rears its head, drawing the deep class boundaries inherent in Ségal's work. Part of the reason why her work exhibits such contrasts may have to do with her upbringing. As a child growing up in the wealthy suburbs of Westchester, she benefitted from a level of privilege by way of her father and the status he brought to the family. Then, in 1963, her father passed away suddenly, stripping her family of the status they once enjoyed. This left her mother, now widowed with children, to act as the breadwinner supporting her family during a time when single motherhood was still largely taboo. Ségal recounts the Dash television advertisements of her youth that she felt, even then, were inaccurate depictions of womanhood, informed by hers and her mother's exceeding capabilities.

Dash's distance from the viewer was shortened to begin with due to being a copy of a laundry detergent bottle, but it is shortened further by the accompanying story of Ségal's childhood. The artist states that, in hindsight, she may have been subconsciously channeling this

relationship with media, but while creating the work, her focus was on testing her ability to create the piece at all, replicating a Dash bottle right down to the typography of the inlaid face.¹⁵ Labor, in multiple forms, emerges through the body of *Dash*. The commemorates and honors Maintenance Art as it refers to the maintenance object. This term, dubbed by New York-based artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, emerged from the performance of her famous work *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973). As mentioned before, a bottle of laundry detergent is the antithesis of a Birkin Bag as the products juxtaposed against each other offer a stark, perhaps uncomfortable, look at class as it related to labor. Like Laderman Ukeles washing the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum museum, laundry is a labor that is never done. Cleaning, scrubbing, and purifying must always occur as a result to the natural state of living; the natural state of humanness that is accumulating dirt. The vehicle of this purification being the cleaning product which comes in the form of dish soap, shampoo, floor cleaner, or laundry detergent. While luxury handbags hide the labor that goes into it, the Dash bottle is a sign of labor itself. In other words, the distance between *Dash* and the viewer is much closer than the distance between the viewer and the bags of the *Cathedral Candy Series* based on their respective referents.

Most people in America have a closer relationship with a bottle of laundry detergent than they do a Birkin bag, but the value placed in the latter is much higher despite it being an object most will never see, much less interact with.¹⁶ A Birkin Bag is removed from the fabric of the everyday, like a beautiful alien flitting in and out of existence, and thus it is deemed special because of this manufactured image. Meanwhile, a bottle of laundry detergent is a frequent guest in the minutia of daily life, entering our lives as quickly as it leaves; a disposable yet readily restocked

¹⁵ Barbara Ségal (artist), in discussion with the author, Feb. 2021.

¹⁶ This is not to monolith all people in America in relation to a Birkin Bag specifically, but as a larger, Western culture, more value is put on luxuries than needs. How Western culture values diamonds is an example that comes to mind.

product associated with those who perform the labor of laundry, their own or others'. *Having* to perform labor versus not. This is directly applied onto the surfaces of Ségál's works by her choice in sculpting products, whether they are cheap or expensive. In turn, those sculptures absorb the social values of the objects they represent, and thus, the monetary values. This is reflected best in the provenance of the separate works and how *Cathedral Candy* is more in demand. *Dash* only has two items on its provenance. A 2008 exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art, and the 2021 student exhibition at the same institution. Meanwhile, the bags of the *Cathedral Candy Series* are like celebrities making appearances in the windows of the Saks 5th Avenue store in Manhattan, Art Basel Miami, Samuel Owen Gallery in Greenwich, Connecticut, Gallery Biba in Manhattan, and Le Galeries Bartoux also in Manhattan just to name a few. Commercial galleries vie mostly for the work *Crowned Jewels* (2019), which has made the most appearances out of the series. Meanwhile, works like *Duomo* are less high-profile. (Arguably, the most famous of Ségál's clothing works is *Bonne Amie* (1992) whose many museum and gallery features makes it instantly recognizable).

The *Cathedral Candy Series* represents more than just luxury, wealth, fame, or beauty: it represents something out of reach. That something can be any of those listed things, but with a major focus on art possessing some sacred quality coupled with viewers reacting appropriately to experiencing said quality, calling that something "divinity" is not so strange. When the distancing aura of divinity is present, the object becomes dehumanized in a sense. This is the desired state of artwork for both the work and the viewer because the distance is not there on its own but put in place by the temple of art, the museum or gallery. The near or far distance is determined by how the museum or gallery displays the work which signals to the viewer how near or far the distance may be. If the viewer does not associate the work with something that can bestow divinity, then

its distance is close, and thus, less desirable. As can be seen in the attitude towards photographs, for example. Their status as valid art objects continue to be a subject of debate well past their discovery and especially now in the Information Age where everyone has a camera at their disposal. The opposite can also be said. That is, the viewer associating a work with divinity, further the distance, becoming a valid and desirable piece of artwork. This is seen in the differing provenances of *Dash* and *Cathedral Candy Series*. If *Dash* had a similar class-based distance to the sculptures of the Birkin Bags, it would have featured in more exhibitions. However, despite both works being of equal craftsmanship, and using almost identical materials down to the gemstones, they are regarded differently because of the aesthetic and monetary associations of their referents. *Dash* is not protected by the distance that the Birkin Bags enjoy, because it is a sculpture of a disposable, bargain-brand product that shows up in people's lives every day.

Recalling the issue of provenance, for the art world, a work's provenance is part of its prestige. Who owned it and where it was exhibited is a major factor in deciding its price tag. According to an Art Net News interview with artist and gallery director Augusto Arbizo, price is determined by an artist's exhibition history, sales history, career level, and size of artwork.¹⁷ Then there are more abstract factors to consider such as the artist's current popularity and their significance in the context of art history. Capitalist assertion creates and sustains the commercial value of any object, art included. The parameters for deciding on the value of a work include its provenance. How often that work has passed through the environment of affluence—between wealthy collectors, galleries, and museums—helps build its credibility as an object worth its expense. That separation, like a deity, permits the divine to *be* divine as long as distance is

¹⁷ Henri Neuendorf, "Art Demystified: What Determines an Artwork's Value?" ArtNet News, June 26, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/market/art-demystified-artworks-value-533990#:~:text=According%20to%20Augusto%20Arbizo%2C%20director,that%20needs%20to%20be%20recouped.%E2%80%9D>

acknowledged by the viewer. The halo of greatness imparted to the art is legitimized by the church-like spaces it occupies. That art is considered to be ensouled, having the ability to raise viewers to a higher plane of being, despite being created by another human, is evidence of the heights art continues to climb and how its aesthetics inform the entire process. In other words, it must look the part to be considered on this level. Which is why *Dash*, despite being carved in marble, and despite the skill it takes to inlay words to mimic the real thing, does not stand up to the bags of the *Cathedral Candy Series*. This sentiment, interpreted through Ségol's work, reveals what American culture values—perhaps even what it worships—by her immortalizing objects of capitalism in the same material reserved for the gods.

It is worth looking at how aesthetic difference informs the relationship people have with art. Conventionally beautiful products, objects, or people are regarded differently based on constructed aesthetic value. This is known as the halo effect, or how an overall feeling of goodness or badness contributes to many other judgments, whether it is logical or not, whether one is aware of it or not.¹⁸ The halo effect also extends to art in the sense of its perceived beauty. Now, it is not revolutionary to claim that people love to look at things, people, places, and objects they consider to be beautiful. Beauty may be subjective, but it is still shaped by the dominant cultural values of a given place. America, the intermingling of Western European beauty standards over the centuries is transparent. This is most stark in the work of British sculptor Abram Belskie and his 1943 sculptures *Normman* and *Norma*. They are white, monochrome statues—harkening back to Renaissance sculpture—of what the average, or “normal,” man and woman *should* look like.¹⁹ The people depicted are of slim to average body, racially white, and able-bodied. They are both naked.

¹⁸ Eliezer Yudkowsky, “The Halo Effect,” Less Wrong, November 29, 2007, <https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/ACGeaAk6KButv2xwQ/the-halo-effect>

¹⁹ Dahlia S. Cambers, “The Law of Averages 1: Normman and Norma,” Cabinet Magazine, Fall 2004, <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/15/cambers.php>

The works are made close enough to the post-war period that the social push in America to conform to strictly racialized and gendered identities following the war emerge. Looking back at another period that sought to move forward by referring to the past, modern standards of beauty fostered by American Neoclassicism connect with the aesthetic ideologies of the Italian Renaissance by way of their sculptures.²⁰

The Renaissance developed a strong desire to move past what they considered the “degenerate” and “backwards” Middle Ages, fueling the hunt for aesthetic purity in their art, meaning a higher condition of artistic practice that signaled the move forward and away from the perceived impure. In a post-Black Plague world, where over one-third of the world’s population died in the span of four years, the fear of contamination and disease was high. The survivors ferrying in the next era sought to distance themselves from the past while also looking back to it for guidance. Renaissance Italians achieved this through its reverence of antiquity where, through Greco-Roman achievements in fields such as the humanities, philosophy, mathematics, and science, they hoped to find a way forward.²¹ To this day, Renaissance art is some of the most venerated in Western society occupying a large part of American culture with the white statue acting as its herald. Many artists in the 15th century regarded the painting of sculptures to be a referent of the Middle Ages, alluding to that Black Plague defilement extended to sculpture’s pure form.²² That rejection intensified upon seeing actual Greco-Roman statues, all but completely white, as examples of that aesthetic purity they sought after. Additionally, Neoplatonism grew in popularity during this time, further bolstering these views. Yet another callback to Greco-Roman

²⁰ National Endowment for the Humanities, “Neoclassicism and America,” Neoclassicism.us, 2006, http://www.neoclassicism.us/Content/What_Is_Neoclassicism/

²¹ Department of European Paintings, “The Rediscovery of Classical Antiquity,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clan/hd_clan.htm

²² Kim Hart, “Why Do People Still Think That Classical Sculptures Were Meant to be White?,” *Artsy*, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-people-classical-sculptures-meant-white>

aesthetic through its philosophy, Neoplatonism conceptualized the physical world as a lesser copy of a so-called perfect, abstract world. It positioned art and the creation of it as akin to channeling a higher level of consciousness; a way to achieve entrance into that perfect, abstract world by stripping away the dirt and defilement of the physical one. Without using the language of religion, it is clear a higher power played a role in the artmaking process, nonetheless. Equating cleanliness with the sacred in what was assumed to be a transmission of perfection, a stripping of humanness which came with a stripping away of color. What they did not know, or perhaps knew but ignored, was that ancient statues were polychromous.

Renaissance artists often did not experience the ancient sculptures' polychromy; time and weathering wore away the paint applied on top of the marble, and any remaining paint was cleaned off, regarded as leftover dirt. *Dash* is not polychrome in the sense of having paint applied to its surface, but in its use of the colorful potential of marble to bring qualities to this work that challenge these paradigmatic Renaissance and Neoplatonic visions of white marble sculpture. *Dash* is antithetical to the Renaissance sculptural tradition while also being derived from it. Recall that Ségal spent her formative years studying marble carving in France and Italy, specifically the Florentine chapels that feature mosaic marble inlay as well as the interior of the chapel at Chartres. Color was a part of Ségal's artistic practice from the start, not unlike her Renaissance predecessors, who carved in white marble. The polychromy of Ségal's marble sculptures is one of the factors that helps shorten the distance between viewer and artwork, something emulated from the ancients' justification for using polychromy. For the denizens of antiquity, color breathed life into the statue of their gods, without it, the work remained unfinished. Color animated the sculptures, implanting humanity within the stone, closing the distance between the worshipper and the cult object. This

was the desired effect as color helped bring the deity onto the physical plane, from the heavenly, spiritual one, to be petitioned and worshipped by their followers.

While the legacy of Renaissance sculpture is a colorless one, the foundational ideas behind the supremacy of the white, Greek statue crystallized within the hugely influential eighteenth-century text *History of the Art of Antiquity* by Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Hailed as the father of art history, Winckelmann categorized the rise, peak, and fall of Graeco-Roman society and culture through their arts in two hefty volumes. Though some of what he wrote is regarded as a fabrication of his both limited knowledge and romanticized version of antiquity, the strength of Winckelmann's narrative informed Western ideals of beauty whose aftershocks continue to be felt today. His most popular contribution to ancient scholarship arose through his creation of what he viewed to be two Greek aesthetic ideals permeating from ancient work: the beautiful mode and the high mode. In the beautiful mode, the Greek ideal revealed itself as sensuous and graceful, while the high mode illustrated the sober and pure.²³ The earthly versus the divine concentrated in these two categories of Greco-Roman sculptures. The same sculptures that influenced Ségal and her own artistic journey inspired Winckelmann to an obsession with the Greek aesthetics that she turned on its head. According to sculptural aesthetics expert Dr. Alex Potts, Winckelmann's distinction between two aesthetic modes articulated a series of ideologically loaded dualities between the bodily and the immaterial, between a cultural ideal of "refined hedonism" on one hand, and of austere heroics and virtue on the other.²⁴

For Winckelmann, examples of the high style and the beautiful style could be found in the *Niobe* (found 1583) located at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and *Laocoön and His Sons* (found

²³ Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994

²⁴ *Ibid.*

1506) located at the Vatican Museum in Rome, respectively. The *Niobe*'s stoic face is sculpted to express such intense fear that both face and body become neutralized, while the *Laocoön* is full of drama and sweeping curves, displaying a more expressive fear. This way of categorization that Winckelmann invented became not only the foundation of his landmark text, but also reinforced the popular notions of the ideal human being. Bodies, facial features, skin tones, and genders all had a precedent rooted in the desire to progress from the ashes of the Black Plague. Like *Normman* and *Norma* appearing after WWII, there became a standard for one's identity, brought forth by the aesthetics considered the most culturally desirable. What was thought to be beautiful in antiquity influenced the beauty standards of the Renaissance,²⁵ but even more so, it influenced Winckelmann. It is through him and his work that Western ideals of antiquity formed into what they are known as today. Winckelmann had a major impact on how scholars regarded the sculptures of antiquity; those attitudes bled out to the larger society for more than two hundred years since. There would arguably be no *Normman* and *Norma* without Winckelmann.

²⁵ Vanessa van Edwards, "Beauty Standards: See How Body Types Change through History," Science of People, 2015, <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/beauty-standards/>

Conclusion

When aesthetics and its attendant associations with divinity are informed by capitalism, art is not immune to the effects. Because of this, all institutionalized art is not created equal based on the institutions' power to determine the value of objects based on their judgement. Art is not immune to conversations about its entrenchment with capitalism by virtue of it being art. Neither does it exist on a higher plane. Art can be expensive, it is a luxury after all, but what it is not allowed to do is to assert itself as a divine or holy relic that is used to justify its expense. Luxury products do not assert this notion, only art does. Birkin Bags may be regarded as works of art and collected in the same fashion, but even the people who own or covet them know they are products. (Granted, said products' own "divine" properties have more to do with the object elevating a person's status than they do a person's spiritual higher self.) Art cannot accomplish the myth of divinity by itself, however. It needs the legitimizing museum or gallery to welcome it into its temple as a new cult object for the viewers to venerate, thus, becoming "viewers." An example of this can be seen in the most famous work of artist Félix González-Torres *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), institutional involvement creates the aura and the distance of a work.

Untitled is a continuously replenished pile of wrapped candies that museumgoers are invited to pick from and eat. The work may seem to break the distance between art and viewer as the viewer is invited to physically consume the work. However, this is not the case so long as the work remains under the roof of the institution. There is a kind of theophagy occurring with this work, comprised of cheap candies that are today highly valued both financially and spiritually. Consuming artwork in the manner of a Eucharist to gain its blessing, even in the context of the candies representing the body of an AIDS victim, realizes that divinity in art and thus creates

distance. To clarify, when taking part in the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, one does not become God; they participate in taking in the holies of holies, but the distance between themselves and God remains. This incredibly human work by González-Torres becomes dehumanized as it is commercialized having bounced from institution to institution since its inception due to its subsequent fame. *Untitled* becomes consumed not only by the viewer, but by the temple of the museum or gallery that utilizes its notoriety not for the sake of the art, but to further reinforce the power of the institution as the gatekeeper of canonized art. As long as this man behind the curtain, so to speak, continues to operate, art can be a covert vehicle of capitalism that goes unnoticed until it is too late.

Art can exist without dressing it in sacred sheep's clothing, it can exist as a product. This has been the case for centuries, and millennia before that. Why should a conversation about aura not include capitalism and the aura *it* imparts upon art? What about the aura the provenance imparts upon art? When speaking of art in such flat terms, it loses its divinity and becomes like another luxury product; out of reach, but recognizable as such. When art is unrecognized as part of capitalism, it is asserted as within reach. The distance, so heavily referred to throughout this essay, is a metaphorical one, of course. It is the capitalistically informed contemporary aura that always separates the art from the viewer, replacing the religiously informed aura of previous times.

Where does Ségal's work live in this realm? What is unique about her work is its ability to balance itself at the crossroads between these networks. As works of marble that depict commodities, her sculptures disrupt the art world narrative, throwing back the curtain and exposing the illusion. It is no wonder that critics such as the one Ségal encountered, who assert that art has a soul and therefore it is not a commodity, react in such a way. They know how institutionalized art can function covertly to make easily digestible a capitalist narrative. One that is steeped in

religious rhetoric, furthering the accessibility of capitalism as a divine system that can remain unquestioned so long as it can utilize institutionalized art for this purpose. Thus, Ségala's work is called "soulless" to discredit it in an attempt to declaw the sculptures' power in relating art and capitalism, regardless of the great praise the artist's work normally receives. This kind of work, that is, artistic reproductions of products in marble, questions the art world system and its power over the viewing public with ease and grandeur. Works like *Dash* and *Cathedral Candy* progress the long legacy of marble sculpture while being artworks that are firmly seated in their era.

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