

~~YAMI-ICHI: Traversing Borders and Reviving Bartering Economies - A Revolution!~~

[Yami-ichi - Balck-Market]
By Katrina Russell

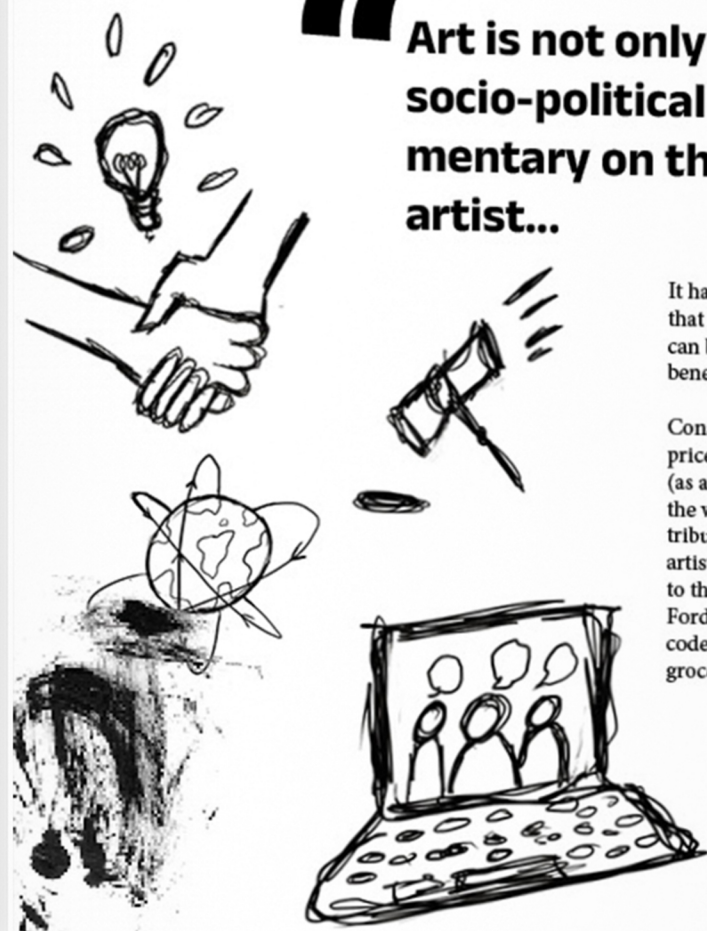
An artist myself, I have often lamented that I couldn't afford to buy my own art. How ironic. I have longingly admired the creations of my peers, wanting to support and invest in their journeys, though my financial circumstances have generally prevented me. And then I was informed about Yami-Ichi. An art auction like no other. This event lifted the veil on a world I had become disillusioned with. In collaboration with Exotero Collective, this auction was the culmination of a series of digital events that began with an introduction to the programme, Traversing Borders. As we gathered in the digital waiting room, I had no idea what to expect. But once the auction began, I saw the concept come to life. We were briefly introduced to the participating artists and then allowed to get to know them in breakaway groups. Then the bidding began!

However, in a jarring challenge to the entrenched notions of what an art auction is, money was not welcome. On a personal level, I was witnessing a renaissance in the arena of art, exchange, value, and accessibility. Flipping the script, the artists sat empowered and validated on the screen. Asking often taboo questions about value, exchange, and the monopoly on art, Sachiko Osawa, her team of art enthusiasts, and collaborators challenged who decides the value of a work of art? Critiquing how art has become a commodity, a symbol of status, power, influence, and celebrity.

“Art is not only a socio-political document and commentary on the culture that bore the artist...”

It has never sat comfortably with me that a work of art, something that an artist has poured their essence, emotion, and ideologies into, can be exchanged for something as objective as money. Who truly benefits from this exchange? How invested is the buyer?

Considering the percentages artists sacrifice off the final selling price to galleries and selling platforms, it is unsurprising that we (as artists) have been hungry for a revision of the status quo. At the very least an innovative option. Often exceeding 50-60%, these tributes to art dealers drive the final price to buyers up to ensure the artists make a relatively small margin. This is particularly relevant to those less established and emerging artists. As noted by Sheridan Ford in 1888 ‘...in the business of buying and selling pictures, the code of ethics or morale is less high than that which obtains in the grocery or boot and shoe trade.’



Even in 1888, Ford picked up on the reductive culture engulfing the arts. Art is so much more than an object or consumable product available to the highest bidder. Palaeolithic cave art signified the birth of culture, apparent abundance enabling the shifting of priorities regarding resource allocation and skill development.

Palaeolithic paintings expressed self-reflection, how the painters perceived their worlds and each other; these early painters documented their fears, their hopes and dreams, their loves and losses. Then Neolithic culture branched out to multi-media with pottery and weaving. In other words, art and culture are interwoven and as such should not be monopolized. Art is not only a socio-political document and commentary on the culture that bore the artist, but also a souvenir of this stage in the artist's development and journey. It is a piece of them.



This art auction destabilized the status quo of the art trade and redefined the value of art by placing the power back in the hands of the creative. Respectfully turning away from the dollar, pound, yen, and euro, it revived the concept of barter economies where skill exchanges and trades in opportunities battled for the attention of the artists.

While I was initially sceptical about the exchange of art for anything other than money (we all have bills to pay), I was blown away by how Yami-Ichi created a beautiful working concept that democratizes the sale of art. The Yamiichi (meaning 'black market' in Japanese) art auction showcased a world where artists could share their desires, needs, and wants with a captive audience. I watched with delight as opportunities far more valuable than any monetary amount were pitched to the artists. The energy was supportive, liberating, and affirming, producing an inspiring experience for all involved. I myself placed a bid that embodied an artistic collaboration and photography location. The act of exchange or bartering is transformative and enables goods to transcend regimes of value (Appadurai 1986). I greatly enjoyed reflecting on the relative nature of our needs, aspirations, and creations' ethnographies. Within the study of anthropology, barter economies have fallen in favour of monetary economies. While traditionally meant to support exchanges of equal effort and investment between buyers and sellers in a more convenient form; money has become imbued with a socio-political value far beyond its humble conception. A convenient, but not necessarily equal token.

The revival of a barter economy in this arena marked an act of levelling, a 'coincidence of wants and needs' (Humphrey, Caroline Humphrey, Stephen Hugh-Jones, 1992). It was powerful to see in this event how my value as an art lover gained legitimacy and was not reduced to the sum of my financial resources. As an artist, it gave me hope and excitement for the future of the art trade. But trade and alternative economies in general.

In their own words:

'Challenging the current perception of art as a commodity in a capitalistic art market'

YAMI-ICHI is an international art project that replicates a traditional art auction but replaces cash payments with non-monetary trade-offs and exchanges. The project encourages young and emerging artists to re-evaluate how their work can be perceived and connects them with potential clients or future collaborators.

I cannot wait to attend your future auctions both in person and on a digital platform!

“Challenging the current perception of art as a commodity in a capitalistic art market...”

