

## ARTS ONLINE

Matthew Mirapaul

## A Market for Flotsam and Jetsam as Performance Art

Trong Nguyen sold a bottle of designer perfume last week through the online auction service eBay. Normally such a sale would not be considered a work of art. But Mr. Nguyen is an artist, and the \$11.45 deal he made is part of a yearlong, untitled art project.

Over the course of 2001, Mr. Nguyen (pronounced win) plans to use eBay to sell 1,001 of his possessions. He has already collected more than \$230 for 20 items, including the perfume, books and the word "nothingness," which he sold to a friend for 70 cents. Are the buyers getting utilitarian objects or artworks produced in a limited edition of 1,001?

The answer lies in the eye of the purchaser. For those who know they are participating in an art project, the objects they buy from Mr. Nguyen are backed by an eBay invoice that serves as a certificate of artistic authenticity. For those who merely happen upon his items, they are just more online auction goodies. But if you accept Mr. Nguyen's conceit that each item contributes to a work of art he is creating, then each item should be considered, say, as one would a brush stroke on a painting.

Like many young artists, Mr. Nguyen, who is 29, is using the Internet as a new medium for exploring familiar aesthetic issues. Does an artist's touch turn an everyday object into an art object? How does an artwork receive its value? How does one's possessions define an identity?

Mr. Nguyen, who was born in Vietnam and came to the United States in 1974, also is striving to connect with an audience that he might not otherwise reach. Countless artists and musicians have learned to bypass traditional channels of distribution and sell directly to the public through the Internet. But those transactions remain mostly commercial. What Mr. Nguyen is saying is that if you bid, then you are participating in his art game, whether or not you know it, and the Internet becomes a performance-art stage rather than an information platform.

Mr. Nguyen, who has a master's degree from the University of South Florida, is not the only one on the virtual performance-art stage. Two other young artists, John Freyer, 28, and Michael Mandiberg, 23, are engaged in similar but independent online projects.

If you buy into this as performance art, then the objects themselves are artifacts of the performance. If not, this is just another online garage sale.

Mr. Freyer says he intends to sell most of his belongings through eBay in the coming year, and is documenting the process on his Web site, AllMyLifeForSale.com.

Mr. Mandiberg is selling all of his possessions, for which his Web site, Mandiberg.com, functions more as a catalog. His items bear a fixed price, and are available for purchase through the Internet-payment service PayPal. All three online projects are asking viewers, in a commodity-driven culture, whether one's personal identity is defined by nothing more than a collection of stuff.

As with many virtual endeavors, there are real-



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Trong Nguyen, an artist, in his Brooklyn studio with items he is hoping to sell on eBay.

world precedents for these projects. For example, starting in the 1970's, artists like Christian Boltanski and Daniel Spoerri produced works based on inventories or collages of quotidian objects, and the theme persists. On Friday the British performance artist Michael Landy is scheduled to unveil a piece for which he has reportedly disassembled thousands of his personal items (including a car), although he has yet to reveal what he will do with the components.

Philippe Vergne, visual arts curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, said: "It's good that artists are trying to infiltrate the Web because if they don't, it's going to become a place only for commerce. I like that they are occupying this vacuum and making art projects."

The online selloff projects are not the first acts of virtual performance art. Natalie Bookchin, who teaches at the California Institute of the Arts, said there was already a name for infiltrating a nonart Web site for artistic purposes: parasiting. Ms. Bookchin has seen it before. In 1999 CalArts students used eBay to auction the institute's gallery space. Last year members of the online-activist group RTMark auctioned their passes to the Whitney Biennial artists reception.

For Mr. Vergne, these projects question whether an artist's involvement adds value to items that might not otherwise have any. "It touches the fetishism that we can have with artists," he remarked. "Kurt Schwitters said everything artists speak is art, so you can also say that everything artists touch becomes a piece of art."

It is not easy to discern that Mr. Nguyen's eBay listings are part of an art project. To find his items, you must go to eBay.com and search for the seller "tgn2001." Although he annotates some listings with personal stories, this artist, who lives

in Brooklyn, does not fully reveal what he is up to.

But central to his work is the first item he put up for sale, the book "Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist," by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, published by Yale University Press in 1979. The stories attached to his listings seem true, but Mr. Nguyen said he also was "inserting fiction to create my own mythology." As the 1,001st item, Mr. Nguyen will auction his complete list.

If Mr. Nguyen is building his image through his eBay listings, Mr. Freyer, a graduate student at the University of Iowa, is committed to conveying his identity as accurately as possible. To that end, each item is accompanied by a personal history.

Visitors to Mr. Freyer's Web site can see clearly that this is an art project, but eBay shoppers who unwittingly win one of the items are apprised of his true intent when they receive his invoice.

Mr. Freyer has yet to decide if he will divest himself of everything, especially since eBay regulations prevent him from offering items like his Social Security card. And like Mr. Nguyen, he is selling immaterial possessions.

In December he sold his birthday party in New York to Brian Troyer, a Web developer at an Internet company. Although they did not know each other, Mr. Troyer now spends time with some of Mr. Freyer's friends. "We all agree it's the best \$1.25 I ever spent," Mr. Troyer said.

Since Mr. Freyer started the venture late last year, he has sold 120 items for about \$700, including his childhood false teeth to the university's art museum and his winter coat to a man in Indiana. He asks buyers to keep him apprised of his past belongings, and hopes to visit some of them later.

"People are the objects that surround them," Mr. Freyer said. "The question this raises is, what happens to the goods and services that define who you are when they are no longer yours? Is Ralph in Indiana going to become more likely to consume canned tomatoes?"

When the project concludes, Mr. Freyer wants to sell AllMyLifeForSale.com to someone who will start the project anew.

Mr. Mandiberg, a New York artist, does not expect his project to end. When his stuff is sold, he replaces it and adds the new items to his online catalog. He is limiting himself to the real items in his possession. So far he has sold about 30 things, including his Curious George lunchbox collection and a lone black sock. His wallet and its contents remain available for \$2,500.

Like Mr. Freyer, Mr. Mandiberg accepts that his possessions may define him, and he says he fears losing his identity if all his possessions are purchased. "I feel very much exposed," he said.

As should all eBay sellers, who may now realize that the objects they offer reveal quite a bit about them. But is it also art? Is every bottle of perfume sold on the Web a possible Rodin? "We're calling it art," Mr. Nguyen said, "but people do it every day on eBay."