

Jody Servon

*Items Matching [Art]: Ten Years Later*

I don't know if I was born a collector, or if I became one at an early age. I do know that I have always loved objects, especially ones with histories. Both my parents enjoyed hunting for the perfect addition to their collections, which included everything from antique furniture to shaving mugs and unfinished quilt tops. Early mornings were spent bundled up in the back seat of the car cruising to flea markets, junk shops, and yard sales. We arrived so early that many sellers were still unpacking. Later on, in the midst of browsing, my mother would have to stop occasionally to buy a cup of tea or a sack of egg sandwiches to nourish my sisters and me. My father always took two trips. On the first pass, he methodically scanned each aisle for bargain-priced items or things he couldn't live without. Then on the second pass he would discover freshly unpacked wares or revisit items that had garnered his attention earlier. My dad also bargained endlessly for everything he bought. Throughout our childhood it was embarrassing for any of us kids to admit to him that we paid the asking price for anything. But more times than not we would return home with paper bags filled with treasures wrapped in newspaper. This is how I learned to love other people's stuff.

When I began working on "items matching [ART]" in January 2000, not nearly as many people used the Internet as is the case today<sup>1</sup>. It was a time of transition, and I was experimenting with new ways to make art. Museum and gallery websites were popping up all over the web, and anyone with an Internet connection could be an artist, a curator, a dealer, or a patron. Individuals were empowered to publish what they wanted, whenever they wanted. This constant flow of information was exciting, and eBay was a life-changing discovery for me—a person who grew up traveling to antique emporiums and estate sales. People seemed to buy and sell everything on this cyber flea market. I remember even reading a listing for a woman selling her own teeth (used, of course). I was no different, searching for things I collected, like Bakelite bracelets or Jadite dishware. I spent countless hours scanning listings for all sorts of things—even with my slow dial up connection (or maybe it took so long *because* of my dial up connection). I was ecstatic to shop from home in my pajamas twenty-four hours a

day. Then, during one of my browsing sessions, on a whim, I searched the word “art.” The results included original pencil drawings, black-and-white photographs, hand-carved sculptures, manufactured oil paintings, blown glass animals, cast resin statues, on and on. The initial search fascinated me, and I continued to see what my quest might elicit further. And, as I continued “searching for art,” I became more and more captivated by the ever-changing array of objects available online and by what happens when the buying and selling of art is accessible to so many. I was intrigued by what I was witnessing in this new wave of marketing and consuming of art. The more and more I thought about it, the less surety I had. But it was my obsession with this idea as well as with eBay that prompted me to assemble a collection of art sold on this particular cyber-forum by people across the United States.

Art objects function in society in vastly different ways—as home décor, educational tools, historical representations, status symbols, and entertainment. Most people trust that something is art because it is displayed in a museum or gallery. There is a set of standards in place—which may or may not be apparent to the outside spectator—for what gets shown in public art institutions. But, as an artist, curator, and a “consumer” of art, I gravitate toward the nebulous boundaries between what makes something “art” and something else “not.” For me, the definition of art is not just a personal one, but one that shifts continuously and ought to be contested regularly. But what do we consider as art in our everyday surroundings? We may disagree about a store-bought reproduction of an Impressionist painting—it may be art to one homeowner who hangs it in his living room, but considered kitsch to an avid collector of contemporary art. Just like the proverbial children who play with the boxes their Christmas presents come in rather than the toys themselves, each of us has a different set of values and preferences when it comes to labeling something as art.

My aim when making “items matching [ART]” was to challenge such conventional attitudes towards art, with many of the objects included in the project not fitting within the traditional classifications that museums, galleries, high-end auction houses, or academic institutions have in place. If a museum is a place where objects are legitimized as art, where meanings and values are discovered and preserved, then showing this work in a museum was an essential layer of the project.<sup>11</sup> Visitors were encouraged to evaluate his or her own criteria of art in conjunction with the seller’s descriptions that were included in the exhibition.

Before purchasing the art items that I would use in this project, I set specific parameters. I relied solely on eBay to purchase everything. Each seller described all the items as “art” in their auction listing. All items were up for bidding on February 29, 2000, to represent a cross section of goods available on any given day (even if it the extra day that only occurs on leap year). My limit for each item was \$10. To avoid international shipping costs, I only bid on items that were for sale in North America. My first search for art priced less than \$10 produced a list of approximately 18,000 results<sup>iii</sup> (A similar search in 2010 resulted in 226,139 items.).<sup>iv</sup> Some items were eliminated because they involved a proper name (as in Carney or Garfunkel), part of the title of an album or book (as in *Art of Animal Drawing*), or were tools or materials for making art (Pretty 15” Tall Unique Club Gourd for Arts & Crafts).

My project budget was \$1000, which allowed me to purchase approximately 100 items. I tried not to purchase similar works of art, however. For instance, if I won an auction for a piece of art made from a tin can then I did not bid on another tin can item. The seller’s use of language in their listings also often swayed my interest—so much so that in my exhibit the titles of each piece remained direct copies of the seller’s own auction-listing, with misspellings, capitalizations, and playful language maintaining the item’s yard sale feel. How could I resist pieces titled: “actual bird nest + fake chicken = high art,” “Metal Art MOUSEterpiece / Cute MUST SEE THIS,” or “LAWN NESS MONSTER Loch Ness Garden Art”? The sellers’ descriptions of the works also sparked my need to choose particular items to bid on, such as the drawing of “Devil Takes a Piss” by Johann Prinkle. Here, the seller claims “it will fit perfectly into the breakfast nook or makes the perfect gift for any occasion.” I am not sure who—besides me—really wants a drawing of the devil peeing on the street hanging in their home, much less a room they eat in, but the ad copy seems to have worked its magic on me. In the case of “FOLK ART WISHBONE PEOPLE,” the seller claimed, “I am sure you collectors are very knowledgeable when it comes to this type of art.” I still have yet to meet a collector of wishbone people<sup>v</sup>—though one could conclude I now belong to that group. In any case, I was hooked. I became deeply disappointed when items exceeded my budget or when I was outbid on items such as “STANS STUMP ART CHAINSAW CARVING,” “SISSY’S STONE PETS ~ Siamese Kitten \*rock art,” and “Folk Art Painted Black Mammy Biscut Cutter.”

One piece of artwork I purchased was from Steve, a State Farm insurance salesman from Tucson, where I was living at the time. But because the “Cool Retro String Art Sculpture” was sizeable, its shipping costs would be more than double the purchase price, so I made arrangements to meet Steve at his office after hours. I informed a girlfriend about where I was going in case something happened and I never made it home. This was my first (and only) time meeting a stranger I communicated with over the Internet.

After exchanging my five-dollar bill for the string art sculpture, I then asked Steve a few questions. I had already noticed that most of his prices were so low he was hardly getting compensated for his effort and time. By my calculations, he spent at least an hour working on each item he sold. He also needed to photograph the object, upload the images, write the item description, list the item on eBay, close out the auction, contact the buyer, pack up the piece and then finally ship it off. So I asked him whether he thought his time worth more than the few dollars he made. “It beats watching TV,” he responded.

Throughout this project, I communicated with some interesting folks. The man I acquired the Jimi Hendrix drawing from sent me a note offering his artistic services. He informed me that I could send him a picture of anything and he would draw it, for a small fee. Another seller named Human Tripod auctioned a pro-hemp drawing that championed the legalization of marijuana. The piece was hand-drawn with Sharpie marker on loose-leaf paper. Weeks passed, and all of my other purchases had arrived—except the pro-marijuana drawing. Finally, I heard from Human Tripod. He had misplaced the drawing, so he sent me a cash refund, an autograph from a colleague who was “busted for growing medical marijuana,” and a note claiming he would send me the drawing free of charge when it turned up. I thought I would never receive it, but it arrived in my mailbox over a year later with a note apologizing for the delay.

For three weeks after the auctions ended, it was like Christmas every day. When I arrived home there was a pile of Priority Mail<sup>®</sup> packages on my front steps. I loved unwrapping these new additions to my collection—even the ones that smelled of cigarette smoke from their previous owners. Some works were advertised that they came from a non-smoking home, but I didn’t care. For example, there was only one “HAND PAINTED TURTLE SHELL/REPTILE ART” available in the whole world, and I needed it, no matter what it smelled of. At times I was shocked by the

difference in size of the objects that arrived, like the “Handblown Art Glass Bunny Rabbit.” The picture of the snowy white glass bunny was so much bigger on my computer screen, but when holding the critter in my palm it seemed so diminutive. I checked the dimensions in the auction listing. They were correct— $1/2$  by  $3/4$  inches— so I had hardly been duped. Some sellers even included a ruler in their listing photographs so the scale of the object was obvious. This was genius—I wish it were a standard practice in art history lectures. How many people have been surprised at how small the *Mona Lisa* is when they see the painting in person?

After 124 of the 125 objects arrived (I was still waiting on Human Tripod), I set to work on my installation at The University of Arizona’s Museum of Art. All of the items I purchased were to be on display, the artworks not altered in any way. The objects were either hung on a white wall backdrop or placed on pedestals or shelves, everything properly lit and labeled. The labels included the title of the works and the towns from which they were purchased. In fact, I was so enamored with the seller’s images and descriptions of their objects that I created a catalog to place in the gallery, using the sellers’ exact images and texts<sup>viii</sup> so that visitors could learn more about each item as they viewed the collection.

While I was installing the project, some visitors to the museum even inquired if the museum was finally getting a gift shop. They thought that the stuff I was mounting was for sale—not artworks unto themselves. An ironic mixup perhaps, but not surprising.

When Marcel Duchamp placed a signed urinal in a gallery in 1917 and titled it “Fountain,” his action caused an uproar, and, almost a hundred years later, this same act of renaming a commonplace item as a work of art would infuriate some people. But I belong to the group that believes art is a matter of intention. Just as Duchamp insisted the urinal was art because he said it was art, I believe the objects I displayed in my exhibit are art likewise— because someone auctioned them as art and I purchased them as art. The viewer too is invited to look at them as art as well. Art objects available for sale on eBay may have a different clientele than the objects auctioned at Christie’s, but this shows a difference in individuals, not in any innate quality of the art.

And just as with many pieces of art in collections either public or private, each of the objects acquired for the making of “items matching [ART]” has a personal as well as social history. My desire is indeed for this collection to provide an engaging range of material for us to reflect on

what we think and feel about art. However, the purpose of such an examination is not to determine which criteria are right or wrong, but to understand better how our collective beliefs function in the assertion and consumption of art. In any case, ten years after creating this project, I am still interested in the issues it raises—and looking at the individual pieces themselves still reinforces my love of other people’s stuff.

—January 10, 2010, Boone, North Carolina

i In March of 2000, there were approximately 304 million Internet users, which was approximately 5% of the population. By September 2009, the number reached 1,734 million users, totaling 25.6% of the population. These figures were listed on Global Village Online at [www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm) and accessed on 27 Dec 2009.

ii The first exhibition of “items matching [ART]” was at The University of Arizona Museum of Art. Selections of the project were later exhibited at the Noyes Museum of Art in Oceanville, New Jersey.

iii Based on my project notes, this search took place sometime in January 2000.

iv This search took place on January 9, 2010.

v I regularly discuss this project when I am invited to give a talk on my artwork. And, after ten years, I am still waiting to meet another wishbone people collector. If you or someone you know is such a collector, please contact me through my website [www.jodyservon.com](http://www.jodyservon.com).

vi The US Postal Service provides Priority Mail boxes for free, thus many sellers shipped this way.

vii The images used in the catalog pages for *Artful Dodge* are recreations. The actual images used from eBay are low-resolution files that are not fit to reprint.



Jody Servon, *items matching [ART]*, 2000. Overview and detail images of installation created from items sold as art on ebay.com.

item 1



## Genuine Johaan Prinkle Outsider art-RARE!

Los Angeles, CA

“DEVIL TAKES A PISS”.

approx.14” x 8” .Will fit perfectly in that breakfast nook or makes the perfect gift for any occasion. Done while he was on the streets of Petersburg.Sharpie marker on cardboard.SIGNED. Buyer please pay the postage and Insurance.

**GENUINE.NOT A COPY!**

item 76



## FOLK ART WISHBONE PEOPLE

Jupiter, FL

This is a wonderful pair of wishbone people. Will not try to explain what they are made from, except they are chicken wishbones, the eyes and shoe buttons are white glass beads. The rest I would be guessing. I am sure you collectors are very knowledgeable when it comes to this type of art.

item 62



### Figurine Indian w/ Buffalo - Western Art NR!

Memphis, TN

I believe that this figurine is made from resin, NOT plaster. It is heavy and appears to be hand painted with much detail. The figurine's finish is continued on its back as the bark of a tree. This is NOT the type of item you see at Wal-Mart or K-Mart. The figurine is approximately 5 inches in height and 8 inches in width. My neighbor received it as a Christmas gift (with a figurine of an Indian with wolves that I also am posting on Ebay - see my other auctions) and asked me to post it on EBAY for him. He tells me that it was purchased at an upscale gift shop somewhere out West. That's all he knows about it.

item 28



## Old Americana Folk Art Embroidered Head Doll

North Hollywood, CA

Bought this little doll at an auction with several other old handmade dolls. I don't know it's age nor it's true origin but it's extremely interesting! I believe she is an old wall hanging, the most unusual thing about her is that her head, I think is a old coffee can or a bleach bottom stuffed, covered with a muslin type material. She is a head with a coy girls face , blue eyes looking to the side with a shy smile and blonde hair. She wears a red bonet with white zig zag piping. It's 7x5x4 inches . Her face is embroidered and there is a loop at the top of her bonet for hanging. In good shape. Her head even jiggles a little from the stuffing.

*Graphica* / ARTFUL DODGE / 117

item 59



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**actual bird nest + fake chicken = high art**

Seattle, WA

You know you need this. I found the bird nest last summer. The cardboard chicken I encountered more recently on a trip to South Dakota. The two were meant for each other.

item 102



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**“Bubble Bath” Pencil Art, Local Artist**

Lafayette, IN

This is a nice color pencil artwork that I did myself. The picture is of a puppy in a bubble bath.

item 12



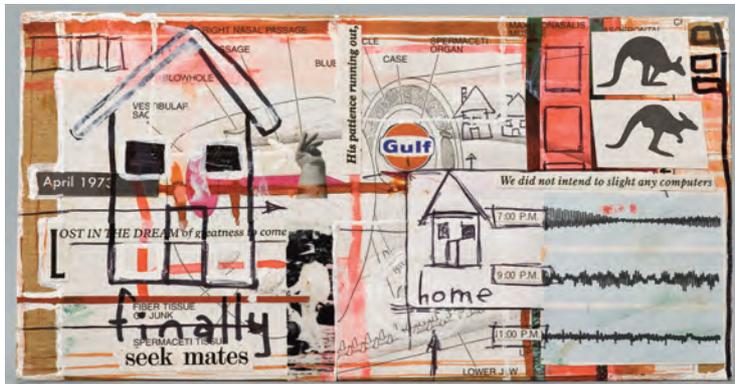
## Red Art Glass Beetle

Gilbert, AZ

A fantasy art glass beetle that measures about 2.25in. long.

Condition is good with no chips or cracks.

item 99



## radiohead inspired art

Baltimore, MD

### Original Art.

\*\*Good. \*Nice. Time Magazine says, "You want it, I think."

{{size=8"x4.25"}&}

Free Love.

item 123



## LAWN NESS MONSTER Loch Ness Garden Art

Santa Barbara, CA

The Lawn Ness Monster™ has just been sighted! Seeming to swim effortlessly through your grass or among your garden plants. As pictured the Monster stretches over two feet long, and weighs about four pounds. The head is over 6 inches tall.

The Lawn Ness Monster™ is available in three colors: green, tile red, and grey. Please see photo below.

Each sculpture is hand made by the artist, Jeff Kennedy, and signed on the bottom.