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On the first floor of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, a piano sits in the middle of a gallery. It is a grand piano, with a mahogany case and ivory keys. Aside from the pristine condition of the glossy exterior, the piano appears normal. Someone could put it in the living room of their upscale apartment on the Upper East Side and it would mesh seamlessly with the velvet couches and plush rugs. In that setting, however, the piano would be able to serve its utilitarian function: to be played. But when placed in the middle of a room surrounded by hanging paintings and decorated with the sign "Please do not touch," the piano ceases to be an instrument. The focus shifts from the utility of the piano to its form. This echoes Immanuel Kant, who argues for the elevation of form over matter which is a purer form of aesthetic pleasure. This statement also connects with Karl Marx's analysis of the commodity. Outside of the museum, the piano is an object to be bought and sold. It is an object that can illustrate wealth or talent. But once it is portrayed as an art object, the value shifts. Thus, the piano is no longer a piano, but a conglomeration of wood and ivory that engages the viewer's senses, allowing them to look with disinterest with an object that equalizes and humanizes its viewers.

It is helpful to enumerate what the piano loses when it is taken out of its utilitarian context. When looked at through the Marxist lens of the use and exchange value of commodities, it is clear that art possess neither of these. All objects that are produced in order to be sold, pianos included, are commodities. When this piano was made, it was made for the purpose of being sold. It is rare for someone to have the skills necessary to make the piano and then put it in their own living room and practice on it every day. This calls for the existence of a laborer to produce the pianos with the intent to sell them. There are two major considerations that go into the production of commodities. These are use value and exchange value. The former is the

usefulness derived from the object, the latter is its market value. Piano makers take both into consideration when creating their products in order to create the desired object as well as one that will produce the most money. When a piano is viewed in the context of an art museum, however, it is stripped of its use and exchange value and transformed into an art object that is ideally neither made for particular consumers or with the monetary value as the objective. In other words, its purpose becomes purposelessness, relieving the object of the burdens of the commodity market.

Typically, another feature of the commodity form is that the quantum of labor is disappeared into the object. This dehumanizes the laborers by taking emphasis away from their contribution to the object's production. It is what makes an art object different from a commodity. The focus of the art object is the intensive labor that the artist took in aesthetically arranging the piece. The focus of a commodity, however, is monetary value. These concepts apply to this piano in an interesting way. What separate this particular piano from other, more standard upright pianos, is that it is an "art case" piano. After seeing this on the plaque on the lid of the piano, I did some additional research to see how it would affect my analysis. It turns out that art-case pianos are specific to the company Steinway and Sons. During the mid-nineteenth century when pianos were considered to be the most popular source of entertainment for families, the art-case piano emerged in order for the wealthier families to distinguish themselves from their lower class counterparts¹. Thus, the function of the art-case piano is different from other pianos. Because the client seeks out the producer in order to obtain the object, the human

¹ Distler, Jed. "Casing the Piano." *Listen • by Jed Distler*. Eric Feidner, Spring 2010. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.

labor going into these pianos, much like a piece of art, becomes part of the criteria for value.

This aspect of the piano already begins to disassociate this object from a traditional commodity and its dehumanizing aspects even before considered in the context of the museum.

Once it is taken in the context of the museum, however, this art-case piano becomes an art object and nothing else. It has no use value and no exchange value as a piano. The focus of this piano that was once how well it plays as an art-case piano commissioned by a wealthy family shifts. The hard-work of the producer, Steinway and Sons, is the new focus. Since the utility of the piano is completely gone, the total evaluation of the piano is based on its aesthetic. The process of taking an object that functions as a commodity outside of the museum and stripping it of its utility demonstrates the humanizing effect of art. It is easy to forget that the piano being pounded on by a pianist in Carnegie Hall was crafted with the intent of making such beautiful music. It is much harder to avoid thinking about the extensive labor that went into a piano that forbids the viewer from touching it. Thus, the piano becomes framed by the artists who created it. It takes on a human element that is absent when the focus of the object is utility. Therefore, art is seen as a humanizing concept in a world otherwise filled with alienating commodity exchange.

This idea is taken even further by Kant. He discusses form and function in a way that complements Marx's analysis of the commodity. By taking the piano out of its traditional performance venues and placing it in an art museum, the purpose changes completely. While the focus of a piano is typically the music that it produces, sitting on the white marble floor of the art museum, the focus becomes the piano itself. It is now an art object meant to be looked at and aesthetically appreciated. This elimination of utility, as mentioned before, focuses the viewer's gaze upon the "restrained elegance of its woodwork" as well as "its squared foot, more like that

of a harpsichord.” When we take in the piano through this lens of disinterest, it becomes possible for us to appreciate its beauty. An informational plaque resting on top of the piano makes it clear that appreciating the beauty of the piano’s form is the objective. The text draws viewer’s attention to the “extraordinary instrument” and its “iron frame technology” and “fine furniture craftsmanship.” There are no references to pianists who have performed on it which proves that the intent of the *Model B Art-Case Grand Piano* is to appreciate its form, not its function.

Kant elaborates on the implications of elevating form over function for viewers. When an object serves a function for the viewer, any judgments made about that object by that person becomes objective. These judgments are tied to individual idiosyncrasies and culture. Thus, it is not a guaranteed that another individual will share the same responses to that object as everyone else. But when function is eliminated and the focus shifts to form, a universal understanding of the beauty of that form is feasible. In order to make beauty an objective term, there must be a place within all of human-kind that recognizes the necessary elements that constitute it. Thus, the response to beauty has a universality not present in other evaluations of judgment. By experiencing the universality attached to experience beauty, Kant asserts that we as human beings lives in a universe that is consistent with nature itself. It is a way for us to look past the banality of an everyday object like a piano and see deeper meaning in its aesthetics.

What makes this piano an interesting albeit complex illustration of this concept is that the utility of this object is music, another form of art. A counterargument emerges, demanding to know why art is defined in terms of the visual, not the auditory. Music is the function of the piano, not the form. It is like arguing the coffee in a cup is as beautiful as the cup itself. They are in separate categories. Furthermore, it not the format of the art itself but whether or not every human being can relate similarly to it. Not everyone can play the piano. Thus, when a pianist

looks at a piano on a stage, it serves a different function for her than it does for a Beethoven enthusiast. The pianist will see an object that they can entertain with, possibly even for monetary gain. Someone who simply enjoys listening to music sees an object that can entertain them. In this case, both sides see the piano as something different. When the piano is in an art museum and **PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH** can be seen in bold in two different places on it, both pianist and audience see a piece of art. This bridges the gap between viewers and puts even the most experienced pianist on par with someone who has never seen a piano in real life. Thus, Kant demonstrates stripping an object of its utility promotes universal connection between all human beings.

This piano is thus a combination of both Marxists and Kantian thought. It is a commodity turned art object, demonstrating how the entire purpose of an object can change when placed in a different context. What this process also demonstrates is that objects are nothing without human thought. Because human beings create objects, human beings also give those objects meaning. The process of a commodity becoming an art object is an especially intriguing one. It suggests that, at some point in the journey of the object, it obtained a certain value to someone. This led to restoring this art-case piano “with vintage parts” for the purpose of being put on display in this museum. The notion that this piano was restored speaks to how it went from a living room to the gallery floor. It could even relate to Schiller’s mythic plot of the “fall to rise.” In order for this piano, which by its nature is associated with utility, to become an art object, the piano must fall. It must not longer serve the purpose it was built for, and lose its ability to make music in order for it to transcend the world of alienating commodity exchange and become art. According to both Kant and Marx, art is something that unites and humanizes us and this art-case piano is no exception.