Uber.com
November 5, 2007

The Expanded Field
Visual Art, Literature, and Critique in Los Angeles
By Andrew Berardini

LAXART Auction

Though I feel somewhat virginal in saying this, but it was my first auction. The robust theater of money had never really interested me, though after having gone it's easy to see how people could be interested. It was not a proper auction as auctions go these days at the big houses, Sotheby's or Christie's, it was a fundraiser for the local kunsthalle LAXART. A packed crowd of collectors, artists, curators, and other assorted riff-raff sipped champagne and bid from a few hundred dollars to almost $30,000. A mix of write-in bids, live-auction, and a E-Bay-like "Buy Now" for a choice few works.

Raymond Pettibon
No Title (I would like)
2007
Ink, gouache on paper
22.5 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles
Value: $25,000
Starting bid: $12,500

The first write-in auction I ever saw was at my local library for a coffee table books too expensive to sell at the "Friend of the Library" bookshop. Not one broke $50 dollars, which seemed to me a lot of money at the time. And everyone who's touched a computer knows what Ebay is. But this was my first live auction, the auctioneer, borrowed for the evening from Christies's, Andrea Fiuczynski, called and spat prices with a robust high energy that felt initially brassy and harsh, but as the bidding continued, piece after piece, the high excitement began to feel an appropriate part of the whole proceedings. She read the items with the same exhilaration for each. Something going for a few thousand dollars to another piece going for triple deserved the same unbending monotone of excitement. Everything she said had two exclamation points after it. The aura of the affair, as I'm sure of all auctions, had something sexy about it. Who's bidding what price for what price? Number cards shooting up around the room, for certain pieces in the early bids ten numbers would shoot up at the same time, the price shooting up higher and higher as bidders dropped out.

In the end, for all of its energy, auctions feel a little sleazy. This was a benefit auction, so any highend sleaziness was out. It was probably the least sleazy feeling of auctions out there because the gathered crowd were probably very happy to be supporting. All the artists donated because they believe in the space, so I was excited for LAXART for each piece that went ever higher. But as a model, the auction is the exact opposite of the kind of contemplation that makes art interesting to me. Auctions are geared for the furiously wealthy to which they cater to, so my feelings about crass competition and the shitty perspective of judging an artworks value by its price were hardly to be mentioned in such a special environment. LAXART, by my estimate, made just under two hundred thousand in the live auction, which makes me beam for my favorite independent space, even if the whole structure of an auction for art makes me a little uncomfortable.

It will probably be my last auction for a while, I'll never go to Christies or Sotheby's ine New York for the real cut throat money laundering, the next bidding block I'll see will probably be similar to this one in that it's for a good cause. To really enjoy an auction, you have to be impressed by the magic of numbers. The bigger the number, the more magic. Unfortunately for my bank account, i'm not impressed by this kind of magic. If there's any magic I'm impressed by, and I'm even uncomfortable in giving the pseudo-mystical quality, it's the magic of the actual art, rather than its cost. In the end, auctions like fairs are the worst places to look at art, even if they rank among the most likely in acquiring it.